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THE SPIRIT OF THE OLD FOLK



BY

MAJOR GAMBIER-PARRY

AUTHOR OF

"ANNALS OF AN ETON HOUSE," "THE PAGEANT OF MY DAY"
"ALLEGORIES OF THE LAND," ETC. ETC.

"Enquire, I pray thee, of the former age, and prepare thyself to the search of their fathers. . . . Shall not they teach thee and tell thee, and utter words out of their heart?"—JOB viii, 8-10.

LONDON

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1913

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THE
WALL
ANARCHIST

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TO
MY BROTHER
SIDNEY GAMBIER-PARRY
IN RECOLLECTION OF THE GOLDEN DAYS
WHEN WE TRUDGED THE FIELDS
TOGETHER
IN FULLEST HEALTH AND STRENGTH

492843



William Downman's,
The Village Green, Loneham,
June 21, 1913.

MY DEAR S.—You will perhaps be surprised when you see that I have dedicated this book to you; but I think you will be still more surprised when you find this letter addressed to you in print—that is, should it ever attain the so-called dignity. But there are one or two things I want to say to you, and as these are somewhat intimately associated with what follows, I may as well say them here.

Do you realise what we were really doing when, all through our younger days, and when we were alone together, we habitually "talked Gloucestershire," as we called it—I mean, of course, the dialect of the dear old County? How we revelled in any new-found expression, didn't we?—how we treasured any fresh turn of speech, and how we laughed with joy when

we met the real article in the flesh and laid by in memory exactly what the old folk among our many friends in the old home said to us in their inimitable way! It all seems very long ago now, doesn't it?

But to go back to my first question, though only to add to it another. Do you know what we were really doing—though not, of course, always—when we aped the phraseology of those who were very certainly our betters? My dear fellow, we were doing nothing less than talking a tongue that, in the great majority of its words, may be traced back to Saxon times.

Of course we all know that, by some, the dialect of our native County is set down as mere vulgarism. It is nothing of the kind. A very learned man, who prefers to be anonymous, has told me the truth—has, indeed, written it down and put it into print himself. And this is what he says: that “on the Coteswolds they speak strong, broad Saxon as their vernacular”; that “the tillers of the land there, many centuries ago, spoke with the same im-

pressiveness, power, and pathos as may still be heard among us"; and that a work written by no less a one than Robert of Gloucester in 1265, "is in the language yet in use by the ploughboys of our more sequestered districts." So that what I have just told you is true, you see. We were often talking something approaching Saxon. Aren't you proud? I am.

But don't be alarmed. This book is not written in debased Saxon. Nor is it even written in "Gloucestershire." And for this reason. Apart from the fact that it would have had few readers had it been so, such a thing would have been impossible. I don't mean the Saxon now, but the Gloucestershire.

You know as well as I do, that many of us hailing from the County have no great difficulty in telling a hill man from an inhabitant of the vale, or even one from the east and west sides of Severn, the dialect of the Forest of Dean being furthermore peculiar to itself. But however this may be, I don't believe the cleverest speller in the world—that is, always supposing he wished to be

understood—could write such things down. Yet it is just there that lies the strength, the forcefulness—the beauty, if I may say so—of the tongue as we have always known it.

All I have attempted to do here, apart from the sketches of old friends, is to recall for you some of the words of our former vocabulary—some of the expressions we so often heard, and grew to use ourselves in all seriousness—something of their quaintness, and that guardedness of utterance that appeared to assert that no self-respecting man could ever be so foolish as to answer a question with a plain “Yes” or “No.” That is all I have tried to do. To have spelt all words wrong—or rather, as they were pronounced—to write z’s for s’s, v’s for f’s, to drop all h’s, to cut out all final g’s—though I have adopted this last for the most part—to write “arl” for “all,” “vur” for “for,” and so forth, would be to puzzle the reader needlessly. And then again, how would one set about writing the word “here” as a Gloucestershire man pronounces it, whether he hail from wold or vale or

forest? How feeble, too, does that abbreviation of "however"—the common adornment of most sentences—appear when written "'wever.' Or to take another instance, "allus" for "always." In such matters it seemed to me there was no way out, and therefore much of the dialect has here been purposely toned down.

I must pass over the other county occasionally dealt with in these pages—our distinguished neighbour, Oxfordshire—and come to another matter.

Do you remember, long, long ago, our playing a trick on poor old Thomas? We had been walking day after day, as was our wont, after those partridges of ours, that sometimes seemed to be a veritable breed of themselves, unlike others elsewhere, such was their amazing powers of running in our heavy clays, to say nothing of their general wildness and extraordinary length of flight.

We had done our usual twenty miles and more, over stubble and fallow and plough, and came towards close of day to where Thomas

had been mowing nettles along a ditch edge, and had left his scythe behind for further mowing on the morrow. It was soon done. A penny rubbed along the edge put that scythe out of action, as we soldiers say, for many an hour. How thoughtless! His age was no less than ninety-one. I wish now that I could beg his pardon. He was one of that class I have attempted to depict here, and deserved our praise instead of such a senseless trick. We knew nothing of it then, but there shone out in that old man the very finest spirit of his class, just as there shines out now in his son, after more than sixty years of labour on the Manor—and “bed-lier though he be, por soul”—the fullest share of his father’s virility—his stubborn pluck, and splendid self-dependence. We should have known better, and perhaps, as Thomas might have said, our best excuse is that “we wus nat’ral mischiefu’ and gallus like, as boys, ther’, will allus be.”

I am quite sure you will agree with me in one thing, and this is that the spirit of the old folk is not dead yet. For my part, I have

found it in all manner of places—not only when meeting those who are the descendants of the friends of old days, but when, for the purpose of practising another art than that of letters, I have lived, as you know, for weeks at a time in their cottage homes. And I can assure you, furthermore, this—that a familiarity with the class, from childhood onwards, has taught me many things, and that with the knowledge gathered has grown a deep respect, and at the same time a very definite opinion that many and many among them deserve to be honoured, in the best and truest sense, as much as any in the land.

I have only one more thing to say to you, and perhaps of a more personal and intimate kind.

You will notice that in my dedication I have given that word “together” a line all to itself. I did so, of course, purposely, and because it seems to me, and doubtless to you and others, often to mean so much. I know few words, indeed, that may mean more: it seems to link up the past with the present, and to fore-

shadow also something of a future, with the great, dim hopes that lie there. What it means exactly here, I must leave you, in full affection, to discover. I am not afraid that you will be long at fault!—Yours always,

E. G.-P.

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THE SPIRIT OF THE OLD FOLK

I

“BITHIE”

EVERYONE in the parish knows Tabitha Steevens, and everyone calls her Bithie—men, women, and children—whether they know her personally or only by sight, as passers-by along the road that runs somewhat above the level of the cottage garden in which she may be often seen at work. Even unobservant strangers look at her twice, for she is altogether uncommon in appearance, as well as often engaged in doing things that others now either shrink from altogether, or expect to have done for them.

For instance, it seems only the other day that she was found by this one shovelling in

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five hundredweight of coal that had been shot down at her gate—the result of the sale of some of the potatoes she had both planted and dug herself, in the patch by the two large apple trees, next the boundary hedge. And her age at the moment was precisely eighty-five.

“ I suppose they says as we’ve got to have it somewhere ; and down it goes, yer see. But I’d learn ‘em, if I’d my way. They wants a lot o’ learnin’, ‘tis my belief, for it be either as they don’t know no better—and about that I has mi doubts ; or else it be as they be afeard of a little extra trouble or work, or summut—and that’s my firm belief. Ah, they should a-seed what I seen ! But there, they haven’t got the spirit in ‘em if so be they had a-done. It be gone, I says—clean lost out o’ the country, I says—and more’s the pity for the country, and them as lives in it.”

And with that she picked up the worn stump of an old bissum and proceeded to sweep the flagged path where the coal had left its mark. She had not spoken with any sound of anger or resentment in her voice, but rather

with regret. She had known what work and trouble meant in her younger days; had indeed touched at all points the life of the labourer on the land, in childhood and early womanhood—touched it again when she married Joe Steevens, the carter at Hinton Farm, farther up the road; and yet again when she had become the mother of five and learnt what it was to keep a home going in the 'forties and the 'fifties. She had watched all the changes that had followed one another in quick succession, both on the land itself and in the hearts and minds of those who worked there, and had noted all in turn.

And thus it was that she could never understand modern ways, and looked askance at them, judging them “a deal too soft, and like enough to make folks nesh¹ and weakly. Do your shoppin’ for yourselves, I says, and you’ll gain by it; and never be afeard of work or dirtying yer hands. More like to make a man on you, if you be a man; and a usefu’ ‘ooman, if you be a ‘ooman.”

Certainly, to look at her, no one would

¹ Delicate.

judge the life she had led had harmed her. In height she had once been full five feet nine, though now a little bent. It was easy to see that her eyes had once been very dark and full of fire, though now a little faded. There was no doubt about her frame ; she was big boned and heavily built ; and she carried her head well, with a quick movement to right or left as if she were afraid of nobody. Her face was long and thin ; and with the loss of her teeth, lips had fallen in, making nose and chin seem prominent. She always wore a small, close-fitting white cap, with white frills at the ears, and tied tightly under the chin by means of tapes, a knitted red cross-over in winter, a skirt of some coarse material cut very short and very full round the waist, with an apron of brown hessian ; and she was invariably shod in what others referred to as men's boots, for they were of surprising thickness and furnished with a superfluity of nails.

Only in one particular did she show her age, and then only of recent years, and this was in her deafness. For some time now, when this one had paid her a visit, she had produced a

slate and pencil that he might write what he had to say. She had somehow or other, and unlike the majority of women of her time, learnt to read, and being, as the Scotch would say, "quick at the uptake," she would usually grasp the meaning of a sentence before it was half completed, and also watch the lips closely for what was said.

The two were old friends and had known each other long, right back to the time when she habitually addressed him as "my dear," to this later period, when she tried, though not always successfully, to call him something else. Of course he had never known her in her girlhood, for this was long ago; but it must be confessed that he often looked at her tall form and marked that carriage of the head, and tried to picture her out in the fields in the wind and the weather, doing the work almost of a man, and, what was more, liking it—tried to picture her back again in those days of sixty to seventy years ago, when more than one man must have looked at her for her stature, her dark eyes, and the dignity that nature had given her, till Joe the carter of Hinton at

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length claimed her and took her home for his own, to the cottage where she was living still.

It was a day in late autumn when that five hundredweight of coal was shot down at Bithie's garden gate. She had been carrying it in, bit by bit, in a couple of old tin buckets, for none of it was large. Someone else helped with the last lots, while she did the sweeping up, her face puckered in smiles ; and when all was done, she turned down her sleeves and followed that other to the door.

“ Yer never wasn’t a-goin’ to turn away from me like a-that, was yer? Yer never haven’t done it yet. You please to come in and have a set down for a while. Here—here’s the chair as you likes: draw un up to fire while I rinses mi hands: this coal-gettin’ is mullockin’ work. The slate’s in the corner ther’ ; but I can hear yer a bit to-day, I finds. ‘Tis like that with this here drummin’ in the yud.”

She rarely waited for an answer now, or a question either, for that matter, her plan being one not uncommon with deaf people, to go on talking, with or without a lead.

She was drying her thin, bony hands on her apron when she returned from the pump in the little back kitchen, the nails in her thick boots sounding loud on the flagged floor.

“Oh, it’s that yer wants, be it?” she remarked, stooping to read what had been written on the slate. “Well, I never! But there, my dear—or, dear soul, I should say—my childhood be long agone, though it be all as clear as they colours in them yollems¹ yonder, when I sits here an’ thinks at edge o’ nights. Bain’t I eighty-five; bain’t I a old ’ooman? I got mi strength, though, if I lost mi hearin’; I bain’t a-done yet! But you’ll have to have it all out, your way, ’spose—same as you did used when yer was no higher than the chair yer a-settin’ in—you’ll have to have yer way, same as yer’ve allus had it, long o’ I. You’ve allus wanted to know; though for why I’ve wondered times. Ther’ be nothin’ in it.”

She turned towards the fire as she spoke, raked the embers together with a broken length of an apple branch, and then put the wood on the top with the deftness of long

¹ Elm trees.

practice. Then she rubbed her lips with the other hand and sat down facing the small window, where a heavy clump of yellow chrysanthemums showed above the sill and caught the pale sunlight of the waning day.

“Mother never got over that, I tell yer—no, she never didn’t. From that evenin’ she wer’ changed ‘ooman, good un to go though she wer’—ay, a proper un! Sammy wer’ her favourite, yer see, bein’ her only boy, like. First come Jessie; then I; then Sammy and the two little uns.

“Jessie wer’ nine when she went out wi’ father and mother in one o’ they gangs. She wer’ a pretty child then, taller and stronger an’ better lookin’ nor I—she wer’ allus terrible pretty, an’ that wer’ her ruin—an’ I wer’ nesh and fady like, an’ kep so long. O’ course she’d got to go out, though she wer’ a girl an’ no boy—all on ’em had to, them days: added to the money, yer see, an’ when it wer’ a job to live an’ many went fammelled.¹

“Wull, back along, an’ wi’ neighbours on the same jobs as ousel’, we was mostly locked up

¹ Famished.

in housen till they come home again; wi', maybe, a bit o' bread and a can o' water set out on the table, an' wi' I lef' in charge of the three others to do best as I could. Do ye think I don't call to mind the turn o' the key in that lock and the hangin' on it in the ivy as grew up to the thatch? I calls it all to mind right enough, for such things burdens a lot behind 'em, as you may judge.

“Left alone, same as that, a pretty caddle us got into at times, and a pretty sight the housen wer' when mother come home in the dark, and set down to light the fire and take off the rags, all wet, as she did bind her legs with. She was wet to her middle, times—and so wer' I, when it come to my turn to do as she done—or try to, 'wever.

“Don't know as I ever told anyun afore,” continued Bithie after a pause, with her head a little on one side, her eyes turned towards the grate, and the fingers of one hand fingering her lips—“don't know as I ever said as much; but it wer' all along o' Sammy's fault. He wer' a boy, yer see—he wer' just a boy, wi' a boy's spirit in un, and as mischiefu' as could

be; and we wus all just clam o' hunger.¹ It wer' in the short days, too; the wind wer' a-blowin' down hill,² and cut in under the door, smart, so as it wer' shrammin' cold wi'out a bit o' firin'. Firin'!—mother warn't a-goin' to leave us wi' any o' that, no fear!

“Wull, Sammy wouldn’t pay no heed to I; for wasn’t un a boy an’ desperate gallus?³ One as wasn’t soon darnted, wasn’t Sammy, wi’ his sparklin’ eyes an’ his brave ways, an’ his laugh as kep’ the fam’ly happy when work was out an’ food in housen scanty.

“Come Sundays, them days, we did have a bit o’ bacon to our dinner, now and again, same as most on us have had since, times and times. Ther’ was a bit o’ gammon-end a-hanging high to a nail that day, and out o’ reach. But it wern’t out o’ reach o’ Sammy—don’t know as much would ’a been had un lived. We’d eat up the bread, what mother left, as soon as the key turned, and ther’ wasn’t nothin’ left then for the rest o’ the day, and it wer’ cold.

¹ Starving.

² North wind; “up hill” being used for the south.

³ Impish or mischiefful.

“The little uns wer’ a-cryin’, when they woke from sleepin’ on the floor, come afternoon ; bein’, as I says, just clam o’ hunger, and not a-knownin’ as all ther’ was, was gone to the last crum. And I reckons as that day the cryin’—though it wasn’t nothin’ new, like—up-set Sammy. He’d been messin’ in the grate along o’ the cinders with a stick end ; but presently I see’d un eyein’ that ther’ gammon as if summut had struck un. He’d got thought-ful, yer see, bein’ just on eight year old, and about to be took on, come the followin’ week, for stock mindin’, or sheep mindin’ in the lane, or summut.

“He didn’t eye it long—not he ; but gets up, an’ wi’out a word to I, he begins a-pushin’ an’ a-pushin’ o’ the table till he gets it agin the wall. It warn’t a mossel o’ use my sayin’ nothin’, bless yer. And then, I’m blarmed if he didn’t get a chair and calls to me to help un, for he wer’ a’ strugglin’ and blowin’ wi’ it. But he gets it on the table, right enough, and then I sees what he been after.

“It warn’t a minute afore he wer’ up on that ther’ table, and a-clamberin’ up the rungs

o' the chair, till so be as he did get on his toes an' could just about reach that ther' bit o' bacon. He knew'd as the little uns, as wer' a-cryin' on the floor, wer' fammelled ; an' I be bound as it never struck un that that ther' bit o' pig's meat wer' raw. He did mean to get the young uns summut t'eat—that's what he meant, an' no thought of aught else.

“ He'd just unhitched it, then, from wer' it hung, and turns round, when overset goes the chair, and he and all comes down upon the floor, where he seemed to be settin', wi' the gammon in his arms. Then he just rolls over back'ards, an' lays, while I did run an' rattle the door to get out. An' a lot wer' the use o' that. We wus locked in, o' course, an' ther' warn't no way out. Then the little uns did set to a-crying again, an' I did join in for fear ; while it wer' growin' dark, an' Sammy lay ther', still as a dead thing, like.

“ But er warn't dead, for just then, as if th' Almighty had a-heard us childern wailin', the key turned in the lock, and ther' wus mother's voice right among us. She wer' down on the floor agin Sammy in a trice. The sound

of her voice seemed to wake un, for presently he open his eyen, and says, that plain—‘I bain’t hurted, mother—I bain’t hurted.’ ‘Then for why don’t you get up?’ says she, a-kneelin’ ther’ in her wet rags, for rain was a-fallin’ terrible as she come in.

“But Sammy never moved; and it come out then as he hadn’t got no felth uv either limb. Then mother turns to I and asks what we’d been a-doin’. An’ I don’t mind a-tellin’ of yer now, as if I never told a lie in my life afore, and tried to never since, I told one then, so be as our Sammy could get shun¹ behind it an’ he wer’ so minded. I says as it wer’ my fault, I says, and as I druv un to it, for why as the little uns were wi’out a mossel o’ fittles t’eat.

“Then father come in, and did granch his teeth like when he sees the lay o’ matters. And Sammy looks up an’ says as he didn’t suffer not at all, he didn’t. Nor did un’, I’ll be bound, for he spoke quite nat’ral like when father laid un on the table, and lit the rushlight as we could all see. And

¹ Shelter.

mother did lap un round wi' her auld shawl, and got the sticks together for the firin', and the little uns fell asleep in the corner a-munchin' on' their bread. I can minds it all, bless yer—ah, as plain as plain!

“Don’t seem as it wer’ long about, arter that. Sammy did turn wonderfu’ comical¹ later, and seemed as though he was a-goin’ to slip off. And so er wus, and did: the spine o’ the back wer’ broke, I tell ye. Ther’ weren’t no hope for un—not a mossel, bless yer!

“Jessie an’ I wer’ sent to bed arter that, I minds; but they never brought Sammy along, as general lay with we. I calls to mind the look o’ mother a-kneelin’ by the table, and father a-standin’ near, and I hear’d father say, savage like—‘Ther’, danged if he don’t foller his grandfather, the way he do take it—danged if he don’t; same heart about un, so far as I can judge, anyways.’

“And mother did look up, and says to he—‘I’ve never lef’ this housen wi’out dread o’ what might happen; an’ I never

¹ Ill and light-headed.

come back to un wi'out thankin' th'Almighty as nothin' had happened while we'd been gone.' She never gave way, though—a brave un wer' mother; a brave un, self-respectin' an' thrifty, like, an' trustin' th'Almighty through all as come.

“She wern't never the same arter that, as I says; but it wer' the shame, later, as finished her, brave heart that she wer'. Ther' wasn't no cowin' mother when she see'd things plain; but it wer' different along o' our Jessie.

“I wer' put out arter that wi' a neighbour, at a shillun a week; an' old Charlotte come in and minded the rest, when mother was a-forced to go out. She didn't go as reg'lar after Sammy wer' gone; but Jessie wer' druv to go along o' father, to help out; and, minds yer, we wer' a fam'ly o' girls arter that, and that wer' wondrous bad for married folks. And as for I; well, I warn't much use, though I did go along at times. You see, I wer' over tall, fady like, an' not much more nor a frame. But Jessie wer' strong and fine to look at—ther' weren't no finer in the parish

round, nor one as wore a prettier face. An' that wer' her ruin, as I says.

"You must minds as in them gangs ther' was folks o' all ages—old and young, married an' single, boys an' girls ; an' toddlin' childern, I tell ye. We was a-marched here and a-marched there, accordin' to the work and place o' workin'. And I can minds one time—though that did often happen elsewherees about—when we was on a job o rippin'¹ over at Thrapnell's, as we started over night, and did lay about in the barns, or where us could, till mornin' come an' it wer' light.

"Willum Cadle wer' badger² o' the gang, and ther' wer' sixty-four on us all told ; and he did make smartly out o' we. Ther' was plenty as said as he did clear fifteen or eighteen shillun a week out o' what we done, besides what he did make on the fittles and things as he did sell to them as wanted 'em, an' extra on the job as well. But he wer' a notorious

¹ Reaping.

² Gang master. The terrible abuses and dangers associated with the gangs were not remedied till the passing of the Gangs Act in 1867. The Act was the death-blow, and the system gradually fell into disuse altogether.

bad un, wer' that Willum Cadle, an' he did flatter our Jessie, when so be as mother wasn't along, for mother wer' torn in two, like, as you may know, an' little money comin' in.

“An' the end on it was, as Jessie wer' lost: the gang wer' broke up; and that ther' Cadle wer' gone, and Jessie along wi' un. Us never didn't hear on her no more. Mother did use to sit and rock hersel' afore the grate, an' get up afore light an' do her work in housen, an' try to keep things mended an' all decent like, for she wer' good an' thrifty. She never didn't give way; nor didn't fatter. They just went on, wi'out hump or hoot.¹ Well, 'em *had* to go on—what more could 'em do, wi' four on us at home beside they, and all on us girls; what more could 'em do?

“And that wer' what the gangs and low money and th'old times brought to such as we—ay, to such as we. And minds; what I be a-tellin' on yer be all true as Book—all true, an' what I seen and done myself, back in yon long times as they did call th' hungry 'forties, and when I can assure you, dear soul on yer,

¹ Without grumbling or crying out.

as many a fam'ly went half fammelled, winter times."

The old woman's voice ceased: silence fell upon the room: the light of the fire threw shadows on the floor and ceiling, for the light of day was dying. Bithie's hands were resting on either knee, and now and then she would raise one and let it fall again, while her lips moved as though she were munching something.

Then of a sudden she looked up, and said, with quite an altered tone in her voice, "But there; us mustn't give way: it be all long agone and forgot; an' mother never didn't cry out, not father neither: it warn't their way like—it warn't their way."

Bithie did not tell any more of her life's story that day, and it was time for this other to be going.

As the cottage was left, a bright light showed in the far distance. Someone had lit a fire in the deep shadows at the foot of the woods, and was making up his pile of clearings for the night. The light gleamed brighter, and then died down again, the blue smoke gathering

volume and floating away through the great tree stems and up over the silent hills. The air was quite still: there were bars of pale yellow in the sky to the westward; but overhead all was grey.

"Pears an' apples be a-blowin' early this year, an' ther' be fogs come along in the day. Never likes the look o' that: means a light hit o' fruit. Fogs in March means frosts in May, they says; an we've had a-plenty."

Bithe Steevens was coming off her small potato patch, clad in her white, close-fitting cap with the frills at the ears, a blue cotton dress, short as ever, and an apron made of sacking. She was using a fork, the prongs of which were worn down to some four inches in length, to help her along, and when she got off the patch she scraped her heavy boots against the tread to free them of soil, much as a man would.

The pear blossom above her head was full out and white, and the apple trees were flushed rose red and had emerald leaves on every twig.

Blue shadows from the larger stems fell across her shoulders and on her white cap; the sun shone bright and warm on the red walls of the cottage; and from the blackened top of the wide chimney above the thatch, there floated the pale blue smoke of a wood fire within.

There was a bench beside the door, and the two sat down there, for neither were in the habit of being much indoors, and there was a feeling in the air of spring.

“Just got the last row of my taters in. May be I wer’ a bit early wi’ the first row or two; but us must do things, such as they, when un can—at my age, ‘wever.

“Wull; I was a-sayin’ to ye t’other day, when I was a-tellin’ yer how as I got married to Joe. Ah!—a many had eye’d me, afore he; but he took me. I wer’ but a slip then; an’ arter my first child wer’ born turned weakly like an’ fady. Did upset Joe, did that; an he ’ouldn’t have no peace till he got one o’ them doctor chaps to look I over. Not as I be a girt believer in *they*. But that un struck it right, an’ I blesses un for it. For

what do yer think he says? ‘My good ‘ooman, the thing for you be the air an’ the open. Get out in the fields, he says, and work along o’ your ‘usbun’. You’ll come to it right enough arter a bit, if it do tire you at the onset.’ And that ther’ man wer’ right, as time did prove.

“Mother wer’ still alive then—well; she did live till eighteen hunderd an’ fifty-one, I thinks it wer’, havin’ gone to work first in the time o’ the wars, when flour was anyhow in price and bread made up o’ all sorts. I’d never leave child o’ mine behind when I went to work—not me! When they was all a-comin’—an’ it was five as I had—mother did come in an’ look to ‘em when I wer’ out.

“The youngest was three when mother wer’ took; but I could take un along then, an’ set un out in the burru,¹ long o’ the rest. The eldest wer’ a boy, and when he wer’ seven he wer’ earnin’—crow-starvin’ an’ that, at a shillun a week. Joe’s money come to eight shillun then, I minds; an’ mine, though that wern’t reg’lar, to sometimes as much as three.

“Ther’ wer’ no mistake about the work,

¹ Shelter from sun or wind.

or the want o' fittal either, for that matter; but it had got to be done an' put up wi'. Ther' warn't no use a-lookin' at it, wi' a party o' seven in housen. In winter times, comin' off whatever it meut be—ay, an' wet, too, right up above the knees on us, and no firing to dry us by but a few stick—we wer' often times glad enough to dip a bit o' bread in a drop o' cider, an' go to bed on that.

“Mother did used to tell as it wer' worsser back along in her earlier days than it ever wer' in our'n, an' she 'ould say as there weren't no use a-cryin' over it, but what us had got to do was to kep in good heart. An' so us did; and wi'out a-losin' by it, 'tis my belief; an' what's more, us brought up the childern to do the very same. Yer see, it wer' the times and changes, like, as druv the women an' the childern out; an' ther' wus plenty as wer' glad to have their work, for it wer' cheap. Any ways; it wer' that or the House for the lot, an' no choosin'.”

A rook in blue-black plumage—probably the oldest in his colony, for he was very cute—alighted almost noiselessly in the big apple

tree, and then dropped onto the ground beneath.

" Ther', beggar his old back on him, if he bain't arter my taters," exclaimed Bithie, rising instantly from the bench and scaring the bird away with her apron. " Despert thieves be they gentry," she added as she resumed her seat—" I knows their ways proper. Didn't I go scarin' on 'em when I wer' just turned eight? Ay; went out as soon as it wer' light, an' come in at muckshut,¹ as soon as I see'd they black-coated fellers off to the 'oods for the night. Begun at a shillun a week and got to eighteen pence: warn't a lot, as you might say, wus it?

" Us took food along, o' course. But it wer' a'most allus bread or a few cold taters, though. An' it weren't a lot different wi' mine, I can tell ye—just bread, home-made, bless yer, wi' now an' then a bit o' cheese, or might be a inon out o' garden when ther' wus one. That's what me an' mine did have, an' us did eat it at twelve an' four. Come Sundays and, later on, other days at times, we did have a

¹ The last of the twilight.

bit o' pig's meat ; but such as beef an' mutton —what folks holds to, these days—may be, we didn't see them more often than half a score o' times in a twelvemonth ; it wer' reckoned a lux'ry among us then, and one not easy come by.

"I bain't no adder,¹ as you should know by now ; but you may take my word for it that to feed and clothe and rear a fam'ly—ay, an' do the mendin' an' cookin', an' keep the house clean—an' things weren't brought along to yer door *then*—weren't no soft job, them days. Prices wer' most allus high : an' when a bad season come along an' it were a'most beyond us to get flour for the bakin', the food as we had wer', may be, cutlins—that's the oatmeal grits—or kettle broth—and that be bread in the kettle—or a score an' score o' times, just the taters an' greens from the garden—an' no more.

"I don't say anythin' agin it, mind, any more than us did then. Us didn't take much account o' *that*. Us wer' happy, if some folks wer' allus mungerin', as 'em is yet. There's never wantin' for them, if in my time there

¹ Not given to exaggerate.

wer' many as had a sad lot to put up wi', poor souls. I say again, as so far as us went we wer' happy and content, an' especial when things did look up a bit—when the money got a bit better, an' food weren't quite so dear; when three o' the childern wer' earnin' wi' oursel', an' we got us a peg in the cot at the back to help pay the rent of a shillun a week an' to give us a bit indoors. I tell ye that wer' famous—an' as it all went nicely.

“ It was twenty-seven years as I worked on this very farm—an' reg'lar, mind yer; an' off an' on till fourteen years agone, when wanted. What I had all the fore part was sevenpence a day; but later it wer' tenpence, or maybe a shillun, wi' a quart o' cider in harvest-time.

“ Ther' bain't a field here as I havn't been over in my time, from hay-makin' in Milk and Honey, to rippin' wheat in the Plecks, or hoein' in Cucket Croat, or pullin' docks an' settin' fires goin' in the Hord Patch—Ah! I can mind the names of 'em all yet; an' the're like enough to be forgot, for folks now do turn round an' asks you, silly like, if you do mention wher' you been—‘Why, wer' ever be that,

then?' they says: I got no patience with 'em"—and Bithie laughed to herself, took up her fork and cleaned the soil from the prongs, and then lodged it against the wall by her side.

"Nay," she continued after a while, "there weren't no work as did come amiss to we 'oomans, from milkin' to chat¹ rakin'. Us reckoned as the year begun arter Harvest Home. Ther' was the last o' the fruit gatherin' then—fillin' the carts wi' the cider fruit, that a man did knock down and we 'oomans did pick up—thirteen pots to the load, an' a shillun a cart-load was what us got. Then ther' was the yelmin'—that be to do with the thatchin', as you knows, or helpin' the men to make a day's wage at winnowin' when 'twas wet, or clat² beating', dung turnin', pullin' docks and cuttin' thistles, weedin' and keepin' the coutch fires goin'; wurzel pullin' an' toppin' as we done by the acre; bean settin', barley hoein', wheat hoein', as was begun in March an' went on till us come pretty well to the haymakin' which wer' some o' the hardest of all—wi'out it wer'

¹ Fallen twigs.

² The clods of earth in a fallow field.

the cheese-makin’—hours bein’ terrible long and terrible tirin’.

“Ah! that ther’ cheese-makin’ and tendin’—that wer’ a job, now. ’Twas work as wer’ never done. Lookin’ arter the made cheeses wer’ the worst, for they had all to be turned reg’lar an’ moved—ay, an’ cleaned an’ wiped careful—an’ each did weigh a quarter of a hundred, and some more. Well, if that weren’t a job to break a ’ooman’s back afore the day was out, I don’t know as what ’ould!

“Then, round we come to harvest again, wi’ the drawin’ o’ the bonds and the tiein’ an’ the stookin’, which was mostly ’ooman’s work. Work along o’ the men us did, harvestin’—drawin’ an’ tiein’ an’ the rest for ’em, and bein’ paid by them as we tied for at two shillun the acre, an’ doin’, may be, half an acre a day. But there—there was nothin’ as us ’oomans didn’t have a hand in, nothin’!

“Go rippin’ wheat? I should just say as I did—an’ times. I done a quarter of an acre or better; times, I have. An’ I ’ould tell Joe as I could beat un at it. Not as us ever had so much as a bit of a miff between us—no, not

from the time we was a-loverin' to the day as he were took, an' they carr'd un out from this very door seventeen year agone come next fall, and when he wer' earnin' fourteen shillun a week as carter, in place of nine and ten as 'twas when we begun.

"See here," she added, pointing to a white wale crossing the thumb and forefinger of her left hand—"that's what I done, the first time as I went at it wi' the shackle.¹ You did use your left to grab the straw, this way; and then cut in quick below"; and the old arms went through the movements again and again.

"Me an' Joe used to take it by the piece, as was the way then; an' be out all day, from when I could join un wi' the childern, to seven in the evenin', tuckin' the littlest under hedge, like, or beneath a girt tree for shade, while us worked, and larnin' the eldern how to help. An' I can tell ye what—as wi' them to pull an' lay the bonds, and to tie an' help stook, Joe an' me at times did do as much as close on an' acre a day, though half an acre be reckoned good work for a man, an' half that for a 'ooman

¹ A sickle furnished with teeth, after the manner of a saw.

—that be, when things went kind an' the straw did stand well, for all do depend on that how you do get on.

“The childern didn't get no pay for their part, for it wer' job work, an' what they did did count in. The pay wer' accordin' as to how the crop did stand, and did run from seven to eight shillun an acre to ten at times, and sometimes more nor that when a crop wer' heavy or wer' badly laid. There was good money to be made then ; an' if it didn't last long, it helped out nice.

“Ther' be folks as 'ouldn't look at such jobs these days, though, an' as tells ye that such bain't 'ooman's work. It wer' just the same, back along. Ther' wer' them as took to it an' them as never did, an' who says as all field work be quite unfitten for a 'ooman. May be they be right ; may be they bain't ; but, afore times, us hadn't no time to think o' *that* : us had to contrive to live—an' a hard matter it often wer'.

“But, the Lord bless yer”—and the old woman raised her voice and pointed to a distant field that was now in grass, but that had once been always arable—“see Long

Friday ther'? That wer' a famous piece for roots. I tell ye I been one of eleven 'oomans a-hoein' that piece, times an' times; one on each land, and at eight pence a day, a-workin' from eight till five, evenings. I warn't very knowin' nor very old when I went at it first; but just married, an' by rights should a' been indoors. You had to put your hoe forrard—always forrard; an' not bein' used to it I couldn't kep up. But I got at it, wi' a little showin', an' I 'ouldn't take a beatin' arter that!

“The hoein' wer' better work nor the liftin', when 'em wer' all soused in the autumn time. It wer' cunnin' work, though, hackin' 'em, and then pilin' on 'em together and coverin' em' wi' their leaves agin the frosties. Ah!—wet work it wus, an' no mistake; but I did allus go out in winter times rigged out for what might come—in a smock an' coarse apron, wi' a cross-over shawl tied round, same as I got now, an' gaiters and stout shoon. Didn't take a lot o' hurt then.

“They'd think theirselves gawbies, wer' 'em to be asked to go about like that ther' now.

But, lor' bless ye, it be year an' year sin' a 'ooman 'a been seen on the farms hereabouts, though in my time they was in dozens, an' the main on 'em wer' married, and some had childern along, and some was very old.

"But ther' bain't the call for 'em now. They be in their housen—an', maybe, that be often better for their homes an' the men as have got to work to keep their homes together, as they says. An' the childern be all at school, and like enough that be better for they, though I misdoubts if all the larnin' they talks of sticks by 'em, or leaves 'em settled in mind. But things be all changed; it be all different to when I wer' young. I found it, right enough, wi' mi own childern, what have all long got married an' gone out; an' wi' some o' theirs married again, so as there's gran'childern an' great-gran'childern—an' not one on 'em bided on the land, not one, though they be all good to I."

There had come, once more, a ring of regret into the old woman's voice. She had ceased to talk of her own life and the hard times of the old days, and was speaking her thoughts out

loud about the present. She knew that everything had not been for the best in former times ; but she shook her head when asked if she thought that what she saw around her was all for the best now—"Can't say," she said—"can't say, at all, I can't."

The light of the sun was turning white ; the afternoon was waning ; and now and then a cold draught found its way round the corner of the house, making the tufts of primroses tremble that grew close against the old red walls. A blackbird piped his flutey note for a moment in the hedge by the road, and sped on with a chuckle. Then a hedge-sparrow's song sounded from the apple tree—the bird sitting quite close on one of the lower branches, where the emerald leaves glistened and the buds showed round and red—as sweet a note as man may listen to. Bithie's quick, keen eyes were everywhere, and she was watching the bird though she could not hear it.

"One o' them blue Isaacs ;¹ that's what he be. They be here allus, an' they be allus the same—been so all my time, 'wever. An' they

¹ Hedge-sparrow.

don't do no hurt, neither, like they pie-finches¹ an' sparrers an' the like. I be fond on the birds, I be, though some on 'em be despe'rt meddlesome, an' costs a farmer a lot—that 'em do."

Once again there fell a silence between the two. Bithie's eyes had wandered from the bird and were looking dreamily into the distance, where the meadows glowed orange-green in the light of the sun. Then once more she began to talk.

“The grass be a-springin', bain't it? Anyun' can see that by the colour on it an' they tussocks yonder. There'll be a crop an' it comes a nice rain wi' April's days. Then, by June, they'll be a-cuttin' again wi' they machines, an' this meadow an' that 'll be all laid in a day, where us did take weeks. 'Tis all quick, but it ain't made as it was in our time—nor so good.

“Ah! that haymakin' wer' hard, but it wer' happy. Us and a lot o' others 'ould take a field, like; and cut an' make, an' set ready for the waggons: the farmer did do the rest wi'

¹ Chaffinch.

his reg'lar men. I can tell ye it wer' bonny to come into they meadows wi' the sun just up—when all the craiseys¹ wer' a-blowin' an' the grass o' June like gold—it done us all good."

"Did you like it all, Bithie?" came the question on the slate; and the old woman stooped down quite close to read.

"Like it?" she asked—and there was fire in her voice as she spoke—"I've told ye all as is; I've told ye what the land was in mi young day, back along, when Sammy lived, an' we lost our Jessie, what never come back. I've told ye of the middle times, an' of we 'oomans in the fields, an' how yer had to keep heart up to put yer fam'ly decent an' to keep yer home together. An' now as I be a old 'ooman' an' sits here a-talkin' to ye, same as when I daddled ye an' yer head was all in curls, you asks me if I liked it, an' whether it wer' all hard."

Bithie was talking quicker than she had done, almost as if she was indignant at the

¹ Buttercups—said to be a corruption of "Christ's-eye," the mediæval name for the marigold.

question put. She had raised one arm high when she broke out again, after a pause.

“Hard!” she repeated. “Bless the live on yer, my dear, I loved it all, an’ dearly! Me and Sarah Pointes as lived on the Green wer’ as merry as crickets, especial’ at the rippin’ o’ the wheat. An’ old Mr. Webb as had the farm then did say as he could hear we a-singin’ at our work, right away from the fields to his farm yard. I took to reg’lar farm work ‘cause I wus in ill health, an’ that doctor chap did say as he knew’d as I hadn’t got a quarter of a pint o’ blood in mi whole body; and it give me back mi health, I tell ye—it give me back mi health; an’ it all come to me as nat’ral, as nat’ral . . . !”

The extended arm fell to the side; the old woman’s story was done.

The hedge-sparrow began singing again; but his notes no longer claimed the same attention, for thought had run off on the possible songs this old thing of brave heart had sung in the days of her vigour and strength—when she clutched at the tall straws of the ripe, red corn, and the shackle flashed in

the burning sun all through the long August day.

Bithie Steevens still lives, and is now entering her ninetieth year. But not so long ago, when this one passed along the road, she was out at the bottom of her garden, armed with a long-handled brush-hook she had borrowed, and trying to trim her hedge a bit and put things tidy.

“ I bain’t afear’d on it,” she called—“ I bain’t afear’d on it ; but it don’t seem to go as it should, somehows ! ”

II

THE THRESHERS

“MOTHER, mother! they’ve started; I can hear ‘em at it.”

It was the voice of a child raised little above a whisper.

“ ‘Tis but five, then: lie over a while, and bide still.”

The little bedroom was not in total darkness, though the hour was long before daybreak on a mid-December morning. The moon was shining and stars were glittering; there was a white light outside everywhere, for the land was in the grip of a frost and the ground was sprinkled with snow. And some of this light even found its way into this small cottage bedroom through a window that was no more than two feet square, to wake a child sleeping there and make her think for the moment that the day was dawning.

The cottage has long since been pulled down ; but in those days it looked out into the yards and faced the great barn of Satwell farm. Its roof was thatched, as were all cottages and farm buildings hereabouts, and the two small windows of the upstair rooms were set deep and snugly in the same. It was in one of these last that the above two sentences might have been heard had there been anyone in the house to listen ; but the only other who lived there, besides Ann Daw and her child, had gone out to his work—and indeed was already at it on this mid-December morning, and partly by the help of the moonlight.

He—that is, Evan Daw—was over in the great barn on the farther side of the yard. The huge doors under the deep overhanging roof of the barn-porch were thrown wide open, darkness being made visible within by two horn lanterns burning rushlights. Such light as these gave was yellow in colour, and in curious contrast to the white that reigned outside. And all that was not in actual shadow in the barn itself appeared to be yellow in tone too, for in the great bays, or mows, to right

and left, were piled many hundred sheaves of corn, and many also lay upon the floor.

Another besides Evan Daw—he called him Jemmy—was at work in there; the shadows of the two as they moved about being cast like those of two great giants on the boarded walls and the many hundred sheaves, piled up and up till they and the moving shadows were lost in the darkness of the roof, five and twenty feet above, where bats lived and cobwebs hung in wreaths, and no light ever penetrated unless reflected from the floor.

Men generally worked in pairs at the task these two had before them, though in exceptionally big barns four were sometimes seen together, as in smaller ones a man would often work alone. Just now they had met to time—half-past four—at the corner of the yard, when Jemmy had fumbled with his hand along the wall-plate of the cart-shed, till he struck the barn key hidden there, and then joined his mate, passing some remark about the cold by way of morning greeting. Evan had meanwhile lit the lanterns outside, and, this done,

the two made their way across the yards, their footsteps muffled in the light sprinkling of snow, the moon casting their shadows in sharp outline as they went.

The great roof of the barn and the overhang of the barn-porch loomed high above them: then there came the grating sound of the key in the lock, followed by that of the heavy doors, half groan half sigh, when they swung back by their own weight, leaving only the racks, or boards at the entrance, for the men to throw their legs over.

“Be-eautiful,” remarked Evan, picking up a birch bissum, with which to sweep out the threshing-floor.

His mate seemed to understand the utterance, and rejoined with: “Ay; nice light—dry, too—it’ll go well this marnin’.”

In a few moments they were arranging the first lot of sheaves end to end across the floor or midstey—the only sound audible, unless one of the two happened to clear his throat, being the rustle of the straw that always tells of warmth and cleanliness. Every sheaf was so placed with the fork that its head met the

corresponding one of the opposite line, the bonds being left uncut for the nonce, and each man managing his own row. They were about to thresh wheat, and these were the preliminaries.

“That’ll do for a lining out of it,” said Evan, going away into the dark on the other side of the barn, setting his fork there, hitching something down from the oak upright, and feeling it over carefully with his hand. Jemmy did the same. Then, without further word, they stripped to their shirts, turned up their sleeves, and took their places opposite one another. It was too cold to stand still long. With a nod of the head both started in strict time, and with alternate strokes swung their flails over their heads and brought them down with a will on the heavy sheaves of corn.

They were both young men, under thirty, and sturdy and strong. They were at work often all through the winter months, and the swinging of the flail over their heads with raised arms, followed by the stoop forward as it was given an extra flick just before it struck, had developed the muscles of back and arms

and shoulders till they were hard and supple as a mariner's mainsheet.

It was good to watch them now, going at their work with a will—or rather, would have been, had anyone cared to be abroad so early in the morning, when the rest of the world was still asleep. Outside the great barn nothing was moving: there was the white light and there were the steel blue shadows, and the silent stare of the moon looking down on the frost-bound earth and these yards and roofs all powdered with snow. But inside, in the dim yellow light, all was action: shadows were dancing there, and there was the sound, moreover, that some can remember still—the music of the flail on the floor—something between the hum of a mill-wheel and the beating of a big drum, with the swish of the flail itself and the whistle of the wooden swivel, followed always by the “thud-thud,” “thud-thud” and the rustle of the straw, with the grain flying merrily here and there as it was driven from the rough, red ears of corn.

The sound of course found its way out into the quiet moonlit yards, and made dull echoes

in the buildings near. In the intense stillness it even reached out into the home orchards—rhythmical as the tramp of a marching host, full always of a music of its own—the steady drumming on the solid oaken floor—for men were threshing in the old-fashioned way, and the flails were swinging in the air.

It was some time ere it ceased. Then the bonds of the sheaves were severed with knives, and the straw spread out anew.

“Not amiss for cutting off, and first time over,” remarked Evan. “I minds that crop in the Upper Dene wer’ heavy. The heavier the crop, the better for the nile.¹ That’s it, bain’t it?”

“That’s right,” returned the other. He had gone to the wide doors and was looking at the eastern sky. “Not yet awhile,” he said; “nothin’ a-gate yet; but dawn’s anighst.”

“Us must get a-gate oursel’, and thresh out,” put in Evan, coming to the door, too, for a moment. “Do allus make anybody swither, spite o’ cold, don’t it?”

¹ The common term for the flail in Gloucestershire; “thral” being usual in Oxfordshire.

Then the two tightened the tuckings of their shirt sleeves, moistened their hands, and went at it again. The grain was soon flying more merrily than ever, and rattling against the racks. Every stroke now added to the quantity lying among the loosened straw of the slackened sheaves, and the men seemed to be redoubling their efforts. The second stroke of each man sounded louder than the previous one; and for this it was difficult to account, unless it was that the first flattened the straw and the second went right home. On and on they went, with few pauses to fork the straw over. The ears were getting lighter, and most were by this time stripped of grain. The second time over, as they termed it, was nearly done, and a few moments later, the men, having satisfied themselves that their flails had nothing left to do, set these on one side and took to the rakes, to get the straw towards the corners of one of the bays, ready for tying into boltings later on.

And just then the first cockcrow was heard, to be answered presently by another farther away. The sky was changing colour

in the east, stars were slowly fading out, the moon was growing paler. On the farther side of the yard others were astir; the men of the farm were coming to work; horses were being fed; and one had already been harnessed to a cart, the wheels of which could be heard going out through the gate and turning into the roadway.

One of the fresh comers stopped as he crossed under the barn-porch, to see how the threshers were doing. The light outside was rapidly eclipsing that of the two lanterns in there; day would be breaking shortly.

“ Been goin’ nicely? Ah; I reckoned as much. That ther’ wheat stood up well, rippin’ time; a good head, and not much dirt wi’ it.”

“ Not a lot,” returned Evan, arming himself at the same time with a wide wooden shovel, with which to push the grain, chaff, and cavings towards the rack, or high boarding dividing the bays from the midstey, for winnowing when more should have been threshed out.

“ Grain been flyin’—right up, high, and all over, I sees,” remarked the newcomer,

watching the two men at work with their shovels.

"Ay; we'll tackle that ther' later," said Jemmy. "Time to dout these now, I reckon," he continued, unhitching the lanterns and extinguishing the rushlights with finger and thumb.

"An' for we to get home and get a mossel t'eat," added Evan. "'Tis come light, 'wever —'tis day."

It was half-past seven; the sun would be up before long. These men had done three hours' work already, and, for the most part, swinging flails weighing, in Evan's case, just over two pounds; Jemmy's was a little lighter. Their job was piecework; they were not going to be away long. Time was money, and they were to have fourpence a bushel for all they did.

Evan's cottage door stood open when he reached it, his wife being busy sweeping out the floor. A fire of sticks was burning on the hearth and a kettle there was at the boil. On the deal table stood a loaf of dark-coloured bread, made of barley flour and

toppings, with next to it, on a chipped blue plate, a lump of lard, and on another some honey, most of which was bee bread.

“ Wher’s the young un—wher’ be our Jane ? ” asked Evan, coming in on to the stone floor with heavy tread.

“ Gone dunny over the sound o’ yourn an’ Jemmy’s flails ; that’s what the child be. Woke I this marnin’ as soon as ever you started. Never know’d the like of her : sound of them flails seem to excite her, like ; she be up in a moment when threshin’ be on yonder.” There was a tone almost of annoyance in Ann Daw’s voice.

Evan only laughed. He had flung his hat on one side, and was sitting down to the table, while the wife poured boiling water on some baked crusts in an earthenware jug ; tea was very rarely seen on such tables as theirs, being then five shillings a pound. This done, she went to the foot of the narrow stairs that led down into the living room by the side of the hearth, and called loudly :

“ Child, child ; be ye never going to rouse ? We be started ; can’t ye hear ? ”

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An old man, with white hair and clad in a white smock, sat in a chair by his open cottage door. In front of him were the yards and ample outbuildings of a large farm, on the farther side of which, and much higher than the rest, rose the moss-grown roof of a great barn.

It was a golden day in October, when trees were of all colours, from russet to flame; when ruddy fruit lay piled in the orchards, and the sward there, though now never dry, was warm to the touch and softer than any carpet to walk upon. A distant clock had just struck three: the sun was still shining brilliantly, but shadows were faint, for there was a mistiness in the air, and the amber and pale green, the flame and the gold that decked the trees, faded away into blue and the greys that belong to the autumn.

The day was a busy one in the yards. The farmer was trying some of his new wheat, to see what kind of sample he would have to offer, prices being very low. The steam thresher was at work, and its hum had filled the air ever since it was first started soon

after seven in the morning, and would go on doing so till the sun went down, and the band was thrown off the driving-wheel for the day.

All the farm hands were busy, and all were dust-covered, except the one in a blue slop tending the engine, and he was blackened with coal and much smeared with oil. Two of their number were on the top of the thresher, slitting the bonds as the sheaves were pitched down from the rick, then dropping them into the insatiable drum whose hum never ceased, and whose tune only changed according to the way in which its mouth was kept filled or left for a moment empty.

Inside the casing endless ingenious contrivances were doing a dozen things at once. Feeding rollers were spinning, and the beaters in the drum were revolving at from six to eight hundred times a minute ; fanners were winnowing ; dust and dirt and the seeds of weeds, as well as the tail and light corn, were being run into different channels, and the grain was being dressed while being threshed ; the rowens were being piled on one side, and the best grain was being run into sacks on the other ; and last of

all the straw was being delivered at the back and dropped on to an elevator that was building a mountainous straw-rick by itself. It was only a six-horse engine; but in a day of ten hours this thresher could deliver with its help fifty quarters of grain threshed, dressed, and sacked up ready for market, at a cost of nine-pence a quarter, wages and coal and all included.

“Cut us out, didn’t it? it wer’ bound to come,” remarked Evan Daw, now an old man, incapable of doing any work beyond a little crow-scaring with an old gun, burning a few weeds and hedge trimmings, and keeping the fires going on the Broad-leys, or cutting thistles in the grass-grounds before they went to seed. He liked to be out, if he could not do much; he had always been so, and moreover had a great dislike to dependence.

“O’ course them niles wer’ right enough; but wi’ a bad thresher or one as wasn’t honest, ther’ wus terrible loss—ay, as much loss as ther’ wus seed corn sown, and sometimes a’most double; I knows it wer’. Some didn’t used to thresh out proper, second time over,

and ther' was corn chucked away in the ears wi' the straw, to be lost. It made no difference how some chaps wus paid—whether it wer' by lot—that be the twenty-fifth part, as wus tried about here when I wur young—or whether 'em wur paid so much a boll or bushel—it wer' all the same; couldn't stop it. Didn't take no pride in the work, you knows; an' it be the same now—ther' be allus mouchin'¹ folks about.

"Ay; it wer' tiring work for them as wern't used to it, and wern't fitted proper with their nile: he must have it to suit un, mind—not too heavy and not too light, or it 'ould tire un shamefu'. But I'll show you one as I allus keeps by me, and never means to part wi'.

"See here," he continued, having fetched something out from behind the door, "this un here be nigh a hundred year old, I reckons. It wer' poor old Jemmy's father's, and I do kep un for Jemmy's sake; not as he'll ever want un again, worse luck. But I'll tell ye o' that presently.

"Now see here now. The like o' these

¹ To mouch is to pilfer; but mouching is also used for idling.

things be going to be forgot, so it's time as you knewed 'em. This here be the hand stick, and that be made of ash; and this un, what beat the corn, be allus made of crab for the sake of the knots on it. Some do call it the swingle, same as we do call a flail a nile. This here be the middle bond that fastens the two parts together, and do run through the swivel at the top of the hand stick, see, and through the leather-bound eye of the nile. And what do ye think that ther' middle bond be made of—I fastened many myself o' that quality? Well, it be made of a girt eel skin as come out o' Severn: us did allus use eel skin for it when us could get 'em. And now you knows the lot. But we've forgot the swivel now, haven't us? That be clever made, bain't it? It be just a bit of steamed hazel; and terrible to fashion, I can tell ye. The rest of the binding be horse-hide or cow-hide, though horse be reckoned best.

"My nile wer' heavier than this un; but not a lot. You never knew'd Jemmy, did yer? Worked along of I for years he did, and we wus mostly threshing all through winter times

—and in yon barn, too. Well, nothin' 'ould suit un but er must go off to the wars, and so off er went—ay, the Crim-ea, that's it. And er done some execution ther', from what we hear'd tell. I can minds it all.

“ It wer' at the battle o' Ink'man, what was begun afore light. They did run out o' ammunition, did our folks. Jemmy, they says, in the end, did get on top of a mound, like, that 'em had throw'd up for protection ; and they says as he did fought there furious. He got hisn's firelock, and he did crack the skulls of they Roosians like hen's eggs, he did. He'd been used to the hand stick, you sees ; and if there weren't no nile a-swingling at the end of it, the butt end did do as well ; and Jemmy did gi'e 'em that, he did—Jemmy did give 'em that—till one on 'em got him in the end.

“ He never come'd back no more, didn't Jemmy. They put un in pit hole along o' the rest o' the Coldstream Giards as fell ther' ; and I've hear'd tell as they got and put up a moniment to 'em, with the names all writ in gold.

“ And folks have told I—and the main of a lot went from round and about here at the time

—as Jemmy's name is ther' along o' the rest, though us never knew'd what er's name was except as it wer' Jemmy—Jemmy what lodged at Brown's. Come here from other parts, he did. But er wer' a good un, wer' Jemmy, and threshed honest all his time. There; I'd a-liked to a-seen un work that ther' firelock o' hisn's that way—ay, that I 'ould, for I be bound he done terrible execution wi' it—he just knew'd how!"

The engine-man was stoking up. There was no wind, and a column of black smoke was rising from the tall chimney, to form into a heavy black cloud above, and then to float away over the top of the great barn and be swallowed up in the end by the mists of the autumn afternoon.

"Gettin' a smart few sacks together over yonder, I reckons," continued the old man, after a pause. "They've been at it since about of a seven in the marnin' and should a-won fifty to sixty sacks by now. Ah—four bushel to the sack and two sacks to the quarter: like enough, workin' the hours as they'll put in to-day, they'll a-got seventy sacks

afore they comes to knock off. If they'd a-been doin' barley, they meut a-done the same, instead of less as us 'ould ; and if so be as it had been oats, they'd meut a-done double in the time. 'Tis a lot quicker than it used to be—a lot ; and from what I can see, I judges as it'll be all machinery arter a bit.

"How much could us do with the nile, did ye ask? Well, Jemmy and me together did reckon to do three to three and a half sacks of wheat, two to two and a half o' barley ; nigh four sacks of oats, and near five when it wus beans. That's about what 'twus, though I don't mean to tell you as it ran as good as that at all times. Sometimes it wer' more, sometimes less : all did depend on what the crop wus—how dry it wus ; the ground it growed on ; length of straw, so as not to interfere with a-linin' on it out : did all make a difference. Barley wer' longways the most troublesome, and the better it wer' corned the less you did earn—doing it as it should be ; and oats wer' the easiest, except it was the beans. You did stand them beans up, you knows, and then did cut 'em down, so as the straw fell over one

way. That wer' pretty work, and many's the wager Jemmy and I had over it, too.¹

"Hours wer' long, o' course; but that didn't signify a lot. We'd begin soon after four, stop for breakfast at seven or half-past, have a mouthful o' bread wi' a horn o' cider—or it meut be two—at about of eleven, and dinner as us called it at one. And us knocked off at four again, or when it come dark. That wer' our day; and the most us did earn wus from twelve to fourteen shillun a week apiece, or when us wus extra lucky meut be fifteen, and wi' two quarts of cider allowed. And when us come to take our money—and that wer' reckoned good money, mind ye—we did leave a bit behind for the rent; and that's what threshin' wi' the nile wus in the years agone wi' we.

"There wus plenty as come along and thought as they could thresh, but 'em couldn't,

¹ As to the quantities given here, while these may be taken as a fair average, the writer knows at least one old man who assures him that when wheat was in good condition and good yield, he could thresh out 12 bushels a day; and also another who asserts that he once threshed out 100 bushels of beans in a week.

and some on 'em didn't mean to, any more than nothin' else. 'Twas bad times wi' some, too ; and a-plenty was on the rates, I can tell ye. Well, it come to this here at last, as the farmers clubbed together, like, and took on between 'em more hands than ever they wanted, to stop them rates from being swelled, and to give work to them as was out of employ. So it was as lots o' they poor wratches, what knew'd nothing o' flail work, wer' stuck at barley threshin' all through winter months, and though it meut a-been done for less than half the money by the machines as they had got in their sheds : I knows it.

" But would ye care to step over to the old barn ? I has summut of a likin' for th' old place, 'wever, and can tell ye a thing or two about it, and yer minds. The master be good sorted, and gives I the grant o' going round where I do like at any time."

Evan walked with a stick now, and was much bent, his shoulders being permanently stiffened by rheumatism. Talking while walking he had never been used to, and moreover his voice was thin and he quickly became breathless,

so he and this other made their way over to the great barn without further remark.

The high doors beneath the barn-porch were standing wide open, and the sun threw a square of golden light on the midstey, the reflection of which lit all parts of the interior, right up to the grey thatch and the rough-hewn, cobweb-hung joist of the roof, five and twenty feet above. The floor had not been used for threshing for a generation, and what had once been Evan's pride was now scored with the marks of waggon wheels.

The idea of a threshing-floor being dirty was to Evan altogether abhorrent; and before a fresh rick or full bay was attacked it always had to be swept out with a birch bissum where he was at work. Some floors were better than others to deal with, he always said; but oak floors, such as the "Good Squire," as he called him, had put down seventy years ago and that still stood in many a midstey on the Manor, were the best of all. Elm was always too dusty and added to the dirt, while wearing badly. Beech might do better; but next to oak, in his esti-

mation, and much to be preferred to stone, came the old Gloucestershire earthen floors that he had helped to fashion as a boy on many an occasion.

These floors were laid down wet in some parts of the county, being made of the surface soil mixed with the strongest clay and also sometimes dung, and then spread with a trowel and rolled. But Evan Daw always averred that laying these floors wet was wrong, because they sooner or later cracked. "Lay 'em dry, same as I watched my fayther do scores and scores of times, and you've got 'em then; though I don't say as they come nigh the heart of oak at that."

To make such a floor, the ordinary gravelly subsoil was mixed with the chippings of free stone in equal quantities. This was sifted twice; first through a wide screen, to catch the stones and gravel used to form the bottom of the floor, and then through a closer one, to separate the more earthy parts from the fine gravel. The finer material was then spread over the stones already laid and the earthy residue scattered on the top of all.

"The whole 'ould be about of a foot thick," said Evan—"and when it wer' levelled, we did kep on a-beating of it wi' a flat 'ooden beetle, summut after the style o' them turf beaters. And I'll tell ye this, as such floors, when 'em was properly laid and rammed, would last a length o' years and be a'most proof against both flail and bissum.

"Some o' the old tackle still about, you sees," he added, pointing to the corner of one of the mows, or bays, where a litter of things had been thrown pell-mell in the course of years—a hand-winnower smothered in dust, a broken barley-chopper, part of an old leaf fan, the rusted iron gear of a four-horse thresher, together with a miscellaneous assortment of implements that had fallen out of use or served their time. "Ah; I can minds when they mows was piled every harvest as come wi' as fine a sample o' barley as ever you seed—and all on it grown on the Banks where now every smite be in grass.

"And look you at that girt beam up ther', as runs across at the spring o' the roof! Well many's and many's the time, I can tell yer,

as I've been perched up there as a boy, to hold the horn lantern with the rushlight, so as 'em could see to unload the waggons when dusk had shut in. We didn't knock off in them days; but kep' on, and never thought on it. What us had to do was to save the barley, and get un dry into barn.

"And I'll tell ye another thing. To get as much as ever us could into these here mows, we did use a horse to tread it; and when one load arter another wus brought in, th' old horse did get set up higher and higher, and 'ould be up ther' two or as much as three days at times. 'Twus easy to mount un up, but a job sometimes to get un down when he wer' right up ther', look ye, in the dark. For the most part we did use a double halter wi' some straw put down on the midstey. Then he'd slide down, right enough, wi' one above to check un a bit by holding to his tail. 'Twus a rare bit o' fun at times; and didn't do the old horse no hurt, bless yer.

"Barley chaff wer' held in remarkable esteem them days, and not much on it wer' wasted, I can tell ye. Everythin', by rights,

was forced to be consumed, as yer might say, on the farm ; straw wer' given loose to cattle in mangers and cribs ; and when us had threshed the barley and chopped off th' eyles,¹ we did fill the chaff coifs—they girt baskets—and throw'd out the whole tack—the straw and the rowens—into the yard at the back, where cows, young stock, pigs and poultry and all manners, come for it as their reg'lar feed. 'Twus all a sight different then."

Evan, like many another contemporary of his, would never believe for a moment that those who handled the new-fashioned implements were better off than he had been ; and with the old spirit that marked his class would defy the younger men to do better work than he did, or had done, in many a direction. Threshing might be quicker and lots of things have been made easier and cheaper, both in the farmstead and out in the fields ; but he always questioned whether fresh difficulties had not cropped up that never had a place when he was young.

¹ The awns or terminating grass-sheath of cone-wheat and barley : pronounced "ahyls," and often written "ails."

"It's like as it meut be with the steam cultivators as have come about," he would say. "See how they do break up the coutch and drops it into every crack, for every mossel on it to grow out and start afresh. There be mischief along many o' such things; though 'em may be a trifle quicker and cheaper at the onset—ther's no gainsayin' o' that."

He would often put it that way. He liked to talk of the past, and to tell of the old days, hard though they had been. He had been proud of his skill, and proud of what he had done and once been able to do. But with that inbred refinement that belonged to many of his class, he hid that pride away behind a certain dignity of manner that had grown with advancing years, and that stamped him now as one of Nature's gentlemen.

Then again, if many of the old tools he had used in former times were now rusting in the sheds and barns, or had disappeared altogether, he knew the whereabouts of those that remained, and would point them out with his stick when strolling round the yards, as he was doing now. Such old tools had once

been a part of his calling ; and as they had therefore, to his mind, been also a part of himself, they were not things to be despised now that they had served their time and fallen into disuse.

The two stood watching the steam thresher, on their way back. The men were getting towards the bottom of the rick, and one or two had armed themselves with short sticks. They were reaching the last refuge of the rats and mice, and a loud laugh would be heard when one of the former proved too much for the men and got clear away. The nine staddle¹ rick of wheat would be fairly finished before night. It had contained some twenty-six waggon loads, and would have occupied two men with the flail several weeks.

There was the sound of teacups from inside the cottage when they reached it. The old wife, Ann Daw, in a coloured apron, was spreading the table with a coarse white cloth and laying out the things. A kettle was singing on the hearth, and soon she would be making

¹ Or staddle stones supporting a rick stand, usually either seven or nine in number.

the tea. The loaf on the table was white—too white for nourishment; there was sugar in a tin; and tea had now come down to pence instead of standing at some shillings the pound.

“ You’ll take a cup along o’ we, won’t ye? ” said Evan. “ ‘Tain’t a lot as we’ve got to offer yer. ‘Tis my daughter, Jane, as have learnt we this,” he added, on entering the kitchen. “ She done well in service; kept her places, yer understands.”

“ She never had but two,” interposed Ann Daw. “ But wherever us ‘ould be wi’out her, the Lord do know.”

“ And that’s truth,” added Evan. “ There’s nurra-one like our Jane.”

“ I’ve been overhearin’ some o’ your talk o’ the nile threshing,” continued his wife, “ and it come into my yud what a liking our Jane did have for the sound of it when she wer’ a child. She did used to wake I every otheren marnin’, a-callin’ ‘ Mother, mother; they’ve started! I can hear ‘em at it! ’—sometimes afore five o’clock and light, and as soon as ever him ther’ and poor old Jemmy was on to it.”

"Ah; the missus used to tell as the child 'ould go dunny over it. Ther' be some like that: it be the drummin' o' the nile as 'tises 'em; and at times it be pretty music, or used to was, 'wever—especial' when the floor wer' heart o' oak."

"Prettier music than that ther' buzzin' over yonder: that be enough to drive folks dafty altogether," added the wife.

"They be a'most through now, and then ther'll be an end to the charm.¹ Quick work, bain't it? Ah; quick work, and a sight quicker than ever the nile wer', or could be. Fifty quarter or more o' corn, maybe, in a day! And us could do no more than nine to ten on the floor in a week—and that be, when things went right. But Jemmy wer' a good un to work wi'—clean, and threshed honest—and never bigged hisself for what er done."

Old Evan was bed-ridden during the last two years of his life, and showed in that state the extraordinary hold on life that is not un-

¹ A hum, or confused murmur: from *carmen*, a song.

common with his class, as well as a full share of the invincibility of spirit that marked so many of his contemporaries. The country side is not yet bereft of such examples, by any means: but looking back, and principally at the older men of a past generation, the fact that stands out very prominently is that conditions which would put a period quickly to the lives of ordinary folk, often took long to lay these old men low. In numberless instances they accepted what came in good heart, and seemed to know no fear; and thus it was that those who loved their honest company, often stood by in some amazement at what they witnessed.

The lives of these men had been spent in the open air, and at hard work from boyhood—in many a case, from childhood. The majority of them may not have been physically powerful; but they were strong, hardy, healthy. Knocks had not been few in their calling, and these they had learnt to take without complaint: exposure to the weather had been their daily experience, and this they grew to accept without a thought, more often with a

laugh: to put up a good fight, as they might have termed it, was no more than any man should do on all occasions, and this the best of them never failed in.

Life in such an atmosphere, if limited in view, had yet taught these men a multitude of things; and so it was that when they came to be laid by, the old qualities in them still had play, and there shone out in them in their closing years characteristics lying outside those usually suspected. They had accepted in contentment the life in which they found themselves. Many—if not the majority—preferred it to any other; and thus they carried the spirit which that life had called forth into the sombre and the quiet days, taking what was sent, and all unconsciously, in a way that showed in truth what manliness and fortitude might be.

Certainly Evan Daw exhibited these qualities in very marked degree. He had been known by many in his parish as one who, “when a job was agate, would be sure to be up at it any more than he’d breath in his body”; while those who were older, recalled that he

was once reckoned almost a conjurer with the flail. "Where Evan had been with hisn's nile," said these, "there was never a corn o' grain in the ears when you held 'em to the light."

That was the verdict of master and man upon him. And when he had grown old, and the flail had long dropped out of use with other now forgotten tools, it was often remarked that he took as much pains with the coutch fires on the Broad-leys as he did when he could just manage, towards the end, to cut a few thistles in the great cow-ground. Fires should not go out, and thistle-down should not be sown broadcast by the wind, if he could help it.

He was always "doing a little"; and his mates on the farm, though all now younger than he, would say to one another as they watched him, "The old man 'll never stop at home. He don't never munger, neither; though many, had 'em been as he be, would have come to be bed-liers long since."

"He did wander a lot, towards the latter

part," related the wife—"wandered a lot, he did. And he took to pickin' at the clothes ; and you knows what that do mean. Sometimes, too, he 'ould keep on a-sayin' 'grain' —'chaff'—same as that. Hisn's mind had got back to the flail, I fancies, for it was most times the grain and the chaff, and the winnowing or summut, as had got to be done.

"But just afore he went and the end come, he rose hisself up: his face lit, like, when he stared through the winder in the thatch ther'; and he did call out quite loud :

"'Jemmy—Jemmy! We've threshed out : I'm a-comin': I can hear yer!'"

III

THE BREAST PLOUGH

WILLIAM TRIPP was in his garden digging his potatoes. It was an August afternoon, and the air was sultry and still, with no definite sunlight and therefore no very definite shadows. A steady, white glare ruled in the heavens ; and to move about required something of an effort, if there was any desire to keep cool. The atmospheric conditions, however, seemed to have no particular effect on William Tripp, for he continued his occupation without pausing to look up, his whole mind apparently fixed upon what the next turn of the fork would give—and what the next, and the next after that—till he should arrive at the end of the row. Not that the rows were long—they measured at most five yards ; nor was the garden large, its whole extent being perhaps twenty poles. That was as much, if not more,

than he could manage, as was evident if you watched him digging these potatoes in the glare and the heat of this August afternoon.

The date must have been about twelve years ago, perhaps a little less; and Tripp being then in his seventy-ninth, this would make the year of his birth somewhere early in the 'twenties of the last century. He was a particularly small man, not more than five feet four in height and very lightly built, and always gave the impression that in his childhood he must have been under-fed. But however this might have been, his spirit was at all times amazing, and certainly outreached his strength; his neighbours averring that "they had always hear'd tell as Bill, ther', stuck at nothin' in hisn's young days, and as no un couldn't check him—and few out-reach him on a job, neither."

Of course that was long ago; but if the small, ill-nurtured little body had been now weakened by time, the spirit burnt bright as ever, and it was evident that so long as heart continued to beat within the confines of that narrow chest, William Tripp would carry on

the matter in hand with a cheery tone in his voice and a smile upon his face.

To watch him at the moment, it was hard to believe that anything would ever make him give in. It was not his way. Nor was it the way of many of his generation, all over the land: the work in hand was the work of the hour, and the thought of whether it was hard or the reverse did not often, apparently, intrude itself upon their minds. The growing of crops was a matter of urgency if they and others were to be fed, and work on the land entailed rough hours. "Some un have got to do it, and they must go at it if t'others didn't." For the rest, they did not often pause to think.

The job that William Tripp had in hand certainly laid claim upon all the spirit at his command, and a good deal more strength than he could at this period lay claim to. In the first place he was crippled with rheumatism, the result no doubt of decades of exposure in the rain and wind-swept fields, and at all times scanty clothing. His hips appeared tied well-nigh rigidly together; he moved always with the help of a stick, and just now also with the

help of his pronged fork. His every movement was slow, and reaching and stooping were evidently points requiring consideration.

When he turned up fresh ground and then broke it up with the prongs, you could hear the tool sing. Then he would get the dead haulm together, and reaching out with the hook of his stick bring the result in potatoes towards him—"that they meut dry nice, and not get too fur away." That was the procedure each time; and if there was room for wonder as to how these potatoes were to be put into the bucket without aid, there was no doubt about every movement being a source of pain to the digger.

The business got the better of the onlooker at last, and having helped the old man off his potato patch and propped him, not without difficulty, on a cricket that stood handy, he took off coat and waistcoat and went on with the work himself—of course under Tripp's directions. To appear to have usurped his place would have been to make a sad mistake: if the job was to be done at all, it must be undertaken by this one as a joke.

Tripp chuckled as he began to appreciate the yield of the Up-to-dates; but he broke out into a cheery laugh when Farmer Hobbs passed in his gig, and in return for a familiar greeting from the digger, shook his whip at him for his impertinence, at the same time muttering something about making him warmer even than he was should opportunity occur.

"Ther' ; he be up in the boughs, he be!" exclaimed Tripp with a laugh—"he wur always inclined to be a bit franzy,¹ like, same as his fayther wur afore un. Ther', I do believes as he never knew'd yer!"

Two rows were dug, and the result put together to dry before picking up. "Ther' now ; an' you please, that'll do ; don't want to get 'em all up yet a bit. Very fair, bain't 'em? Lucky, you thinks? Ah, well ; better be lucky nor rich ; better be lucky nor rich—ay, by far!" There was little sound of old age in Tripp's voice ; all things considered it was still strong ; just as his eyesight remained good, and his hair, worn very short, showed little trace of grey when he took off his hat.

¹ Quick-tempered or hasty.

"Won't do to go inside with these here," he said, looking at his boots with a grin; "put the missus out shamefu': won't ha' no dirt in house, if so be as it can be kep' out."

Leaning on his stick and rubbing his boots as well as he was able on some grass weeds at the foot of the wall, he then led the way towards the house door. "'Twould be cooler in ther'," he said; adding, in answer to the question as to whether the wife was in, "Well, I shouldn't think but what her might be."

There she was, of course, with her homely, smiling face and white hair. She was a few years younger than Tripp, and in appearance bore a strange contrast to him, being large of frame, stout, and what might have been described as "broad and hippy." She wore a cotton dress and a coarse white apron; and her voice was strong and loud, if also pleasant in tone.

"I've been a-watchin' on yer," she said, "a-diggin' our taters a bit. Well, I never: he shouldn't 'a let you done it. But ther', he can't scawt about much hisself, as he did used."

"I'll tell ye what," put in Tripp, "them Up-

to-dates have turned out beautiful : ther'll be a smart few to carry we through the winter, and a sight on 'em be whoppers."

The talk turned after that from what is always an important event in the cottage home, to old friends and things as they used to be. Perhaps the mistake made by Farmer Hobbs brought the subject forward. His failing to recognise one whom he knew well, in such an unwonted position as a cottage garden, digging potatoes, had amused Tripp greatly, and with many a laugh and no little gesticulation he proceeded to tell his missus what had occurred.

"Just like un, it wer'. There, he do feature his fayther remarkable ; he be as like as like. And I worked for he, years ; from the time as I fust come into this part o' the country out o' Glos'shire, 'wever, and married this un here, till the time as he got took with the sezzure.¹ How long ago wer' it ? "

"Since we wus married, you means ? Why, to be sure, fifty-one year come this fall."

"Ay, so it be : you knows. An' what crops he did grow, to be sure, when we wer' set on

¹ A seizure, or stroke.

breakin' up the slopes o' them ther' hills: oats special'. Can't grow 'em now, seemingly, and judgin' by what I sees hauled past here in the waggon. 'Twas the system as was different, in my belief."

"And the tools?"

"Ay; an' the tools, especial' that ther' breast plough, as we called un. Famous tool he wer', too, for the job, and no mistake. But I'll show ye what mine wer' like, look, since maybe yer never didn't handle one yersel'."

Tripp proceeded to lick the top of his forefinger and to draw mysterious lines on the piece of brown American cloth that covered the table. He stood leaning on his stick and had not to stoop. His wife had brought another chair forward and was sitting opposite him, with a dresser holding the household crockery behind her.

"If I can make you sensible, mine—the last I had, 'wever, as Charles as was smith then made for I—wer' summut like this here," continued Tripp, trying to make the lines of his sketch visible on the shiny surface of the cloth. "Don't seem quite right, though, somehows,

do it? No, I couldn't do no better with no pencil. Never handled the like; and it wer' a great denial to me as I never had no schoolin'."

The old man gave up the attempt at last, and sought refuge in a high-backed chair with a cotton cushion in it, that stood on one side of the wide hearth. From there, and with help of stick and hands, he could explain matters more easily.

The tool he spoke of had gone out of use many years in this part of South Oxfordshire —according to these old people, not long after they had become man and wife. Tripp had used it for more than a decade, and his wife had reasons for recollecting its appearance, and had not been behindhand in correcting her husband's draughtsmanship, putting her head sideways, that the lines he was making might catch the light from the window.

At one time the breast plough had been in common use all round here, no less than in other parts of the country, having originally differed little in form from the shovel-shaped plough evolved by the Saxons, which cut a

furrow slice of a kind, and which was the first attempt at ploughing as we know it to-day.

The tool was fashioned in this way and was used in the following manner. It was made of steel or wrought iron, was flat, except at the left side where it was turned up, and measured in some cases fifteen inches in length and breadth, and in others no more than twelve inches long with a width of nine inches. In appearance and size it was not unlike an ordinary shovel, except that the sides were more angular, and its point, or picket as it was called, sharper. The edges, the picket, and the cutting part of the turned-up side, known as the counter, were ground to a very keen edge, the stone for the purpose being often brought to the field where the men were working.

The beam, or haft, was of course of wood, and was fixed into a socket on the face of the plough by wedges, that also served the purpose of raising or lowering the beam to suit the height of a man, the soil he had to deal with, and the depth he wished to go. In earlier days, the beam was from five to six feet long;

but latterly it was not more than four and a half feet, being often forked where it joined the crutch, or cross handle, some two feet wide, into which it was firmly morticed. Usually the beam was quite straight, though in some places it was slightly curved after the manner of the haft of a spade.

The plough itself was generally made by the village smith—the cost being between three and four shillings—and the implement, as often as not, was the property of the man who worked it. The beam was either supplied by any carpenter, or by the men themselves, when only a straight beam and crutch, without the forks, was adopted. The weight of the whole necessarily varied, but does not appear to have exceeded 40 lbs. at most, and many were a great deal lighter.

In working the implement, the ploughman, as the name denotes, pressed his chest against the cross-handle and drove the plough forward through the soil by means of a series of pushes. Such was the earlier way; but a better plan was evolved when the ploughman was furnished with a board slung round his waist; and later

still—that is in Tripp's and his father's days—when this was again supplanted by two pieces of wood, worn over the thighs and known as clappers. These were hollowed out to fit the front of the thighs, and were generally made of beech by the men themselves. A leather loop was nailed to the upper parts of the clappers to suspend them from a leather belt worn loosely round the waist, the lower parts being fitted with straps that buckled round the legs above the knees.

When driving the implement through the soil, the ploughman, in the latter case, no longer used his chest, or the lower part of his body, for pushing; but, in Tripp's phrase, "When we did work 'em, we did push in with our thighs; and every two or three pushes did turn it over to the right side where the plough wus flat."

In this way, when the work was on grass ley, clover, sanfoin, or turf, the surface was pared off into pieces of more or less uniform size, the successive jerks or wrenches turning these over face downwards. The object of this shall be referred to in due course, the work

connected with the breast plough not by any means terminating here.

"It didn't take no learnin'," remarked Tripp. "We had to go at it and in good courage. O' course all depended on the ground you met wi', how you did get on. We was at it most days, March and April; and we was on the turf in the spring times, and stubbles in winters.

"Most o' the work as we done wus piece-work; an' the pay wer' eight shillin' the acre. We did begin work at seven in the morning and go on till five at night, and us had an hour off for dinner, but no lunch time. And when all wer' done, I did walk two mile home, havin' natural' come the same in the mornin'—oftens afore light.

"The sinfine (sanfoin) wus the worse work of the lot, the roots be so strong. They and the stones took the edge off proper, and that meant more grindin' for we. The picket had to be terrible sharp, you understands, and the edge as keen as you could get it; and now and again, when we wus far from home-stead, we did have the stone rigged up, like, under hedge where we could get at it handy.

"The lengths we mostly did wer' a chain long and a chain wide. And any un couldn't do an acre in ordinary ground much under a week, and he'd have to work well to do that. All depended on what you met, and what the ground wer. Ther' wus five on us workin' together on a twenty-acre piece at Kingston Warren, near Kingston Lisle, and an acre was near enough what we could do ther'.

"It wer' very different up Lewknor way. I wer' up that way for a bit, afore I come to settle here and work for Farmer, yonder. The soil up ther' wer' very light and remarkable dark in colour, and didn't go more than about four inches afore it struck the chalky stuff, for it wer' shallow, like. We was a-breakin' up the sides of them hills ther', and ther' wus six or seven on us at it, 'wever. Well, we did always work down hill, and when we got to bottom, us did drag the plough behind us to top, and then did work down again." And Tripp laughed as the circumstance returned to his mind.

"And I'll tell ye what," he went on. "New ways meat a-taken the sunshine out o' breast

ploughin', same as new ways a-taken the shine out of a lot ; but all the horse ploughs on such ground as that up ther' 'll never bring the crops as the breast ploughs a-done former times. They do fetch the sour ground to the top too much—a sight too much ; and that's wer' the mischief's done. Be all different now, though, bain't it ? ”

There was a pause in the conversation after that for a minute or two. Some waggons laden with wheat were coming down the broad road that ran through the village, and that was as broad in some places as it was narrow in others. To look down it from either end gave the impression that the little houses—some tiled, some thatched—had been dumped down much where the builders liked ; some facing it, some sideways to it, others set right back, with their gardens between them and the road.

Half-way along, and raised rather above the level of the roadway, stood the little church of the parish, centuries old, and having elm trees growing along the low wall that bounded its quiet graveyard. On the other side of the

way stood the vicarage, the only house of any size in the place. At three points, the signs of an inn and of two beer-houses hung out over the roadway, telling that this was "The Jolly Farmer," and that "The John Barley-corn," where tobacco and snuff could also be bought and liquor consumed on the premises. And at either end of the village proper stood the houses, outhouses, rickyards, and sheds of two farms, bringing the straggling lines of dwellings to a final termination.

Tripp leant forward in his chair to get a sight of the swaying loads as they passed. "I reckons that'll be the last from the Red-acre," he said. "Ah! the times I've ploughed that, too, and with just that tool as we was a-speakin' on."

Interest in his former calling had not died out in this man by any means; though to look at him might well have made strangers wonder how the small body had been able to follow such a calling at all, with the shortness of wage and the dearness of all things necessary to support life, in those days long ago when he first took to it. Yet he had gone right through

and handled all the tools, even to the implement in question.

To look at a breast plough now and to think of the exertion its use entailed, is for some to dub the implement a diabolical invention, and for others to cease to wonder that men in these fields were often then worn out at sixty years of age, and marvels indeed if they reached threescore and ten. Yet to have had many a talk with those who used it and other forgotten tools in the old days, is to have found such conjectures not borne out by these men themselves any more than they are supported by the rough headstones in the churchyards of their villages. The very reverse is more often the case. There can be little doubt that many then succumbed who were without natural strength, or without a share of that spirit and virility that were perhaps more common then than now ; but the majority worked through, lived to be old, and bore good sons to follow them.¹

¹ In support of this, the following may be adduced. In an agricultural parish in the writer's neighbourhood, the vicar compiled the following figures from his register for the fifty years, 1841-91. In that period, sixty-eight persons died who

"You asks as whether it wer' hard work with this here plough? I bain't a-goin' to tell yer as 'twus work for one as had got leaden socks in his shoes. It wer' hard, o' course, and it wanted strong men to do it as it should be. But I'll tell ye this, as many on us liked it well enough, for us could go at it extra hours and earn more money when the ground wer' right, and we wus doin' piecework. No!—knock us up? It never hurted I, and I was at it years, though I wer' younger then."

Tripp raised his voice at the close of the sentence, and broke out into a laugh at the idea of his being hurt by anything. He even got out of his chair and came once more to the table in order to add emphasis to his words, and there was a tone of contempt in his utterance when he added :

"'Tis they as do molly for theirselves as gets hurted; and 'tis they as brings trouble along to them as they works wi'. I tell ye

were between 80 and 90 years of age, and sixteen between 90 and 100. Of these, thirty-two were 85 years and upwards, and eight were 95 and upwards. Of the eight, one was 99 and one 100 years old. The population of the parish was 602 in 1871; 462 in '81; and 438 in '91.

again, as I never had a misword over the job mysel'; and if it wer' hard—well, I wer' younger and stronger then, and could do wi' it."

"It killed my fayther, did that breast ploughin', anyway," broke in the wife at this point, and without preface. She had not taken much part in the conversation up to now, beyond confirming what her husband said, or correcting him in small details. Her voice sounded loud after the old man's.

"She do always say that," he said, almost apologetically.

"Ay, an' it's truth. Breast ploughin' killed my fayther. Mother always told us as much, and neighbours the same."

"He weren't so terrible strong in the chesties," remarked Tripp, just above his breath.

"An' that's truth again," returned the wife; "and it wer' afore I was born. But it wer' the breast plough that killed un, or mother 'ouldn't never a-said it; and he wer' no more nor forty-three at the time, and lef' mother with four, and I, here, expected. Ah; the eldern of us had to get out and scawt about then—

ay, get out in the fields at any job as come along. And it wus eightpence a day as mother did earn and no more—eightpence a day!"

At that she fell silent for a moment. The sound of children's merry voices came in through the open door. It was school holiday time, and a party of them were having a ride back to the Red-acre in the empty waggon. There were still the rakings to be got up there, if the last of the shocks had been carried.

"It be all different now—all different," said Tripp, watching the children going by in the yellow waggon with the bright red wheels.

"An 'tis a mercy for some as 't be," added the wife. "There bain't no breast ploughin' been done about here since we married, and that be fifty-one year, come this fall. But it wer' that as killed my fayther, weak chesties or no, for mother said it wus, an' what she did say wer' truthful."

It was time to get the potatoes in. They were dry already; no rain had fallen for a fortnight and the ground was dusty. To leave them out might be to lose them; and more-

over the air was sultry and the sky to the south had grown dark.

Five journeys with the bucket completed the job, while Tripp sat smiling on the cricket by the door; and his wife stored the potatoes as they came in the back kitchen, piling them against the wall.

"I burdens tempest afore long," said the old man as he leant on his garden gate, looking up at the sky to the southward and wishing this other one good-night—"I burdens tempest —any way afore marnin'."

It must not be supposed that the breast plough took the place, or did the work of the horse plough. The primary object was to cleanse the top soil and to provide material for what was known as burnbaking—a system that had been carried out in England from time immemorial. All that the breast plough did was to take off, or pare, the surface, much after the manner in which turf is stripped with the turfing iron, the layers removed varying in thickness from two to four inches, and the

sods being turned up in the way already described. When these had lain to dry for three or four days, they were raked together into heaps with short iron rakes, unless they were of exceptional thickness, when the harrow was brought to bear on them.

The heaps varied in size according to custom in different parts of the country, and necessarily depended upon the quantity of material to be dealt with. In some places, such as the parts of Oxfordshire here more particularly referred to, they were of the size of ordinary haycocks, and numbered from ten to a dozen to the acre. In others, especially in Kent, they were ten times this size, being built up of the sods much as bricks are built for burning, and having a chimney, or flue, left in the centre, to prevent the ground beneath the fires from becoming calcined. When the piles were sufficiently dry they were set on fire, the ashes being subsequently scattered over the field and ploughed in in the ordinary way.

While burnbaking was the term usually applied by the labourers themselves in speaking of the work as a whole, the system is

generally found referred to as paring and burning, a term that describes exactly what was done. The ploughing was not an end in itself, and required more strength than art; but burning the sods was another matter, and demanded considerable knowledge and practice if fires were not to go out, the ashes lost, and all the work to be thrown away. The men who did the ploughing also did the burning, and the fires were often alight in one part of a field while the breast ploughs were being driven through the soil in another.

Of the efficiency of the system there can be little doubt, though it necessarily had its opponents. By the majority of farmers it was looked upon as indispensable, and was very widely practised; but others spoke of it as likely to prove ruinous in many cases and do infinite harm in others. Of the immediate gain, however, there was never wanting evidence, and it was only necessary to look at the phenomenal crops that often followed paring and burning to realise that the advantages to the farmer were great. At the same time it must be owned that this immediate

profit, where the virgin turf of the hillsides and downs was ploughed up, was often won at the loss of that short, sweet herbage that the shepherd valued so greatly. Once destroyed, that could not be easily, if ever, regained; and it was often on this account, apart from any theories about Nature being left to do her own work of disintegration, that many were led to regard the whole system with disfavour.

When the breast plough was used on land that had been long in cultivation, and burning followed, little could be urged against it. The farmer, knowing then nothing of guanos, chemicals, and bone manure, was largely dependent on burnbaking for the ingredients he required for the soil; and "all intelligent men," says one writer of old days, "recognised its utility and practised it." Arthur Young, in his *Farmers' Letters*, speaks of the efficacy of the system as "indisputable and unequalled," and goes on to say that "the grand point of paring and burning is the bringing of waste soils into cultivation, one may almost say, in a single day: it is pared and burnt and sown

immediately with turnips, a crop that never fails after such management. . . . I have actually seen a promising crop of turnips on land that only a month before was as black as night itself."

The quantity of ashes is said to have been generally reckoned as five hundred bushels to the acre. Sometimes they were ploughed in hot; and while one contemporary writer speaks of the system "imparting to the soil such instant and ample resources of fertility as are equal to the production of two or three successive crops of corn," there can be no doubt that it was also wellnigh unequalled in destroying ling, as well as great numbers of injurious grubs and insects.

On land such as that stretching away from the slopes of the Chilterns—of light quality and little depth, and where farmers dealt largely in sheep—paring and burning therefore was widely followed. Meadows and grass lands in these districts were few; it was essentially a country of straw crops, especially barley and oats—that grew such green crops as clover and sanfoin, vetches and mixed

grasses, together with famous turnips, and that carried sheep well. It was found, after paring and burning on such land as this, that a maximum crop of roots could almost always be reckoned upon; and that where sanfoin had to be dealt with, the result was as a rule far superior to what could be expected from the horse plough and the harrow, and manuring in the ordinary way.

But if such was the case all over this part of the country, the breast plough was even more in evidence on the Cotswolds. Marshall refers to Cotswold labourers as "expert and indefatigable in the work of breast ploughing," though he dubs it "the most slavish work of husbandry." They were no less efficient, apparently, in the manner of their fires, for he goes on to say that "the sods were all burnt in small heaps, about a rod apart, the unburnt pieces being burnt together afterwards in fresh heaps, so that not a piece of raw sod the size of the hand is to be seen."

The work of these men was evidently thorough, their chief difficulty being to get material, as their descendants say, "tough

enough to handle and rough enough to burn." When sanfoin came to be regarded as "the sheet anchor of the Cotswold farmers," this difficulty often disappeared, the breast plough being found by far the most efficient means of breaking up the stubborn roots that otherwise took long to rot in the ground, while the fires subsequently reduced them to an invaluable form of manure.

Paring and burning was indeed, as Caird writes in 1850, "the great feature in the management of the farms on the Cotswolds." "On a 700-acre farm," he says, "we were assured by the occupier that he every year burnt from sixty to seventy acres of land. . . . No manure of any other kind had ever been applied to one field, and that had been broken up fifty years before, the burning having been repeated seven times in the period. . . . The best farmers on the Wold are the men who burn most extensively."¹

And what of those who carried out the work?

¹ Though the breast plough is rarely met with now, a tool similar to it is still used in some parts of the country for planting potatoes. On the Cotswolds, the writer also knows an old man—a type of the best of the old sort—who continues

Though men like William Tripp referred to it with a laugh in their later days, there can be no doubt that it was often very hard. The prime difficulty of the whole undertaking, however, had always to do with the fires, and it was here that the labourer suffered most. The material pared had somehow or other to be rendered dry enough to burn. Rain and wind and snow frequently played havoc with the work just when the piles were right for kindling ; and even when the fires were at last alight, they often required constant attention during many hours.

On the bleak Cotswolds in winter, the unenclosed slopes of the Chilterns, and the open expanse of country that stretches away from these last to form the flat parts of Oxfordshire and Berkshire, the men at burnbaking led hard lives and were much exposed. At all times it wanted those of good heart and ample courage. The work was for the most part piecework, and the money to be earned there-to use a breast plough to-day, though in this case the implement has no counter. The work done with it is cutting the drains in water meadows ; the old hand in question doing as much as 65 acres of such land yearly.

fore was an attraction ; but often and often the labour must have appeared to be without end. It did not by any means necessarily close with the day, spent in driving the plough through the ground, but was also frequently carried on far into the night, lest the precious fire should go out and time and money be alike lost. And thus it is that the few now left who were once familiar with the art of burnbaking, while speaking of the actual ploughing as having often been nothing to complain about, yet never fail to tell of the constant trouble that their fires gave, and smile or look grave as they recount their stories.

“ You’d never get ‘em to do it now—no fear! Well, for that matter, ‘tain’t wanted : farmers be pervided with other stuffs, these days, and ashes ain’t thought on so much—wi’out it be wi’ the drill at times. But I most in general doubts, wi’ all them chemicals as some on ‘em do use, if ‘em can show the turmuts as we grow’d—or th’ oats either.”

The speaker, Abel Lovelock, was a con-

temporary of Tripp's, and the last occasion on which this one had a talk with him was on a May afternoon some ten years ago. The old man had come out to sun himself, and was lodged on a bank beneath a solitary hawthorn bush that stood by the side of the dusty road, and was then in full flower—white as driven snow in the brilliant sunshine.

The spring was an early one, and in this country, known for its wild flowers, many were fully out a week and more earlier than usual. There were yellow rock roses all along the top of the bank, and where the rough grasses came to an end and the cultivated land began, charlock and campions were in full bloom; a large patch of the blue veronica occupied the ground close by the thorn, and the white and beautifully formed flowers of the stitchwort were already high.

The sun was hot and the air was still. Out here there was only the warm earth, the infinite depths of blue sky, with now and then a draught of air to play with the may blossom, to whisper to the dry grasses, to pass away to where sheep were in fold far away, lying as

THE BREAST PLOUGH

they always lie when the sun is hot at this time of year—tucked close against the hurdles and close together, head to tail, ewes and lambs alike. It was hot for them: they wanted shade, and they wanted sleep, and perhaps they wanted water.

Two cock larks, fighting, came over the top of the bank at incredible speed and disappeared over a barley stubble that had not yet been ploughed, and where an old horse with the water barrel was now coming lazily across, bringing drink to the thirsty sheep. Then two cuckoos began calling in the distant woods, nigh a mile away. Bluebells, there, had long gone to seed, and the wood sorrel's trefoil leaves, with the dog's mercury, now made a carpet of cool green beneath the trees.

You knew the look exactly. You had just come from thence, having noticed that the wayfaring trees were breaking into flower, and that the feathery fronds of the filix were slowly unfolding themselves. You had come out of the woods into the open and taken a line straight across country—past the rye where the sheep were a month ago and that was now

nearly two feet high, where barley was being sown in one place and mangel got in in another, with a wide piece of crimson trifolium in bloom just ahead, and green tares among it making beautiful contrast. The ground was chalky white, and hard and dry, and the sun made all growth flag.

And now you had reached this dusty road ; the warm earth and its growing crops extending on and onwards for many miles ; the illimitable depths of the heavens above you ; with a cool draught now and then to make the charlock and the campions nod to one another on the top of the bank. An old friend sat by your side sunning himself there, trying to take a fill of the first hot day, that some of the aches in the old bones might be drawn out by the sun, and in the hope that someone perhaps might come along to pass a word with.

“ You wer’ fond o’ the land from the first, weren’t yer? Ah, I knows.”

The old man had a trick of rubbing his chin while he talked, enclosing it in the fist of one hand as though he were pulling an imaginary beard. He was doing this at this moment and

looking up sideways, with his head bent to keep the sun out of his eyes.

"Drillin' over yonder, bain't 'em? I reckoned as much from the dust as was a-flyin'. Know'd that ground well, former times; and them pieces beyond, too; right up them hills from wher' you've come. Ah, ploughed it and harrowed it and sowed it—ay, all manner."

The sheep far away were beginning to howl at the sight of the water-cart, rousing themselves from sleep and going over towards one corner of the fold. A lark kept singing overhead, filling the pauses in the talk with song.

"We grew'd some crops them days, and no mistake! The ground wer' done different then. We burnt it, yer knows—ay; burn-baking. Not the whole on it; no fear! Wher'd a-been the time for that? Ther' was other things to be done besides that, and plenty on 'em.

"But that ther' burnbakin' wer' a famous thing. Now, I'll tell ye. Sometimes there wus three on us, sometimes five and six at it, with the breast plough. We did work, one behind the other—followin' one another, as yer might say — same as you've seed

mowers do. We didn't get above nine shillun a week at it on most grounds, and where it wer' stony ; never more, or as much as ten, 'cept it wer' sinfine. When we ploughed and burnt that, we got a pound an acre ; and I'll tell ye as it took a man all his time to burn-bake an acre o' that ther' stuff in a fortnight, most places. 'Tis so stubborn, and don't light but middlin' well. Job to get it to dry ; and then, if wet do come, that sets you back again.

"Ah, them fires ! Sometimes we did harrow the sods, sometimes not ; but when 'em got a bit fine, we did rake 'em up with our iron rakes, and set alight to 'em. No sticks wer' used—no fear ! But once we'd got it to go, we did snatch it up quick. Us didn't wait then while it wer' burnin' ; but on again ploughin', same as afore, though, natural', we did turn round now and again and banked 'em up when they did want it. The hips (heeps) did run about a pole apart, and wer' about a yard through, up yonder. Others, I've hear'd tell, would have 'em half as big as a house : all depended on what anyun had got to deal wi'. The women wer' out then to

help wi' they fires. And we wanted 'em, I can tell ye.

"Ther' was no mistake about 'em—they fires, I means. The ploughin' might a-been hard work, if many on us didn't mind it a lot; but they fires wer' rum uns to kindle, and rum uns, too, to keep a-goin' when you'd got 'em lit. Why, it was often times as we was out' o' nights to tend 'em in rough weather. Ay, and we did slink off, too, of a Sunday marnin', and just so as parson mightn't see us, to keep them hips up. The fires 'ould be out else, and we'd lose our ashes. And where 'ould us a-been then, think ye? We had to light 'em at the first onset wi' any dry rubbish as there wus—the weeds and turf themselves; and we did mostly kindle one from other—a new un from an old un, is my meanin'. But if rain or snow come and put 'em out, or 'em went out through want of 'tention, we wus in a caddle then, and we lost the money too.

"You see them hills yonder, as you've come down now just. Well; me and Willum Tripp and old Thomas as you do minds, and another, I forgets who 'twas, wus burnbakin' ther' at one

time. Well; when we'd done, and throw'd the ashes over and they'd got 'em ploughed in, the land, I can assure yer, didn't forget it for years—not for years it didn't. We'd have some turnips after that—ay, *some*, I can tell ye!

"It wer' the same farther up, too—what was land as had not been broken up afore. Oats wus sowed after the burnbakin' got done, and when it come harvest time and we wer' a-fagggin' 'em, we never ketched a sight o' one another, for the straws o' them oats wus seven foot high if they wer' an inch—and that's truth."

The old man had taken long to tell his story, and had jerked it out, sentence by sentence, often in answer to questions. The afternoon was on the wane. The sheep had had their drink long ago, and were now busy on a new bait, into which the shepherd had just turned them, after a hour and more of hard work on his part with the rammer, the vorsels,¹ and the hurdles. The ground was hard and dry, and holes had had to be driven, two for each hurdle, and one for the vorsel that held it up, and to

¹ The stakes to which the ends of the hurdles are fastened by rings of twisted hazel, known as reeves.

which it was fastened by the reeves. The whole procedure had been so familiar that you pictured exactly what the shepherd was doing, while the old man sitting at your side told of the things "of a sight o' years agone," rubbing his chin with his rough hand.

"That ther' shepherdin' 'll go on," he said. "Never changes a lot, do it? But them other things passes out o' mind, like, and gets forgot."

The two got up from the bank then; and as they did so, a lark rose from the grass at their feet, within a foot of the dusty road. It had been sitting close, all the time; and in its nest were four brown eggs: its presence there explained at once the fighting and the song.

"Ther' be always them about; but I questions if they does a lot o' good—punishes young wheat terrible, 'wever," remarked the old man; and then went on homewards at a slow pace down the dusty road.

A 10-acre piece of pink sanfoin lay in front, under the sun; beyond that a stretch of young wheat, vivid green; and beyond that again the

blue hills, and the dreamy distance of the waning afternoon.

Old Abel Lovelock had worked his breast plough and kept his fires going on many an acre here. But all that was long ago; and if now a strange tool—something between a shovel and a turfing iron with the side bent up—chanced to be unearthed from the cobweb-hung corner of some barn, that had not perhaps been cleared out for half a century, those present would wonder what it might be, being ignorant even of the uses to which it had once been put. And if again, another were shown a pair of clappers—things once worn over men's thighs, to drive the breast plough home—had not such indeed long since found their fires—they might possibly have been judged as articles belonging to the period when women's stays were fashioned of beech in much the same way, only opening with hinges at the side.

IV

NAT ORGAN, THATCHER

THIS wide stretch of rye had been put in, in the autumn—two bushels to the acre with the drill—when the light soil hereabouts was dry as ashes, and the seed ran little risk of suffering from its enemy—too much wet at the outset. So when the spring came there was a good plant; and keep for sheep being none too plentiful, he who farmed this land had put his sheep and lambs on it, to the infinite satisfaction of the shepherd and the equal joy of the sheep. The flock had had their daily measure of it, set out square by square with the hurdles, the lambs being allowed the first bite at each new bait, and being afforded access to the same by means of the iron lamb-hurdle, with its wooden rollers set at convenient width, and generally known as the lamb-creep.

Before they had been over the whole of these twelve acres, the rye in the last baits was as high as the lambs' backs, for fast as the lambs grew, the rye grew faster, till it was time for the flock to be shifted to a grass meadow some way off, and to leave this apparently devastated stretch to recover and show what it could do.

April was only a few days old when the waggons came for the hurdles and the troughs and the shepherds' odds and ends; and then one morning the flock was gone, having departed in a long string—five hundred ewes and lambs—with the shepherd ahead and a young dog at his heels, and an old dog bringing up the rear. The dandelions were in golden bloom where they were going, and there was a rich feed there of young clover, hop-leaf and the rest, as a welcome change of diet after the rye that had grown so strong.

For a while there was not much sign of growth in this last: April rains held off and nights continued cold. It was a famous time for drilling barley, though, farther up the

Dene, and all the farmer's horses and all his men were out, making good use of the favourable opportunity. On the bare stretch where the rye had been green a month back, two women and a child were stone-picking—gathering the flints into small conical heaps, three feet high for easy measurement, and apparently getting so tired from stooping and stooping all day long, that now and then they sat down on the dusty ground and gathered only such stones as lay within their reach.

Then came the cloudless nights and the silent sapphire sky, with the feeling of frost still in the air, and that comparatively meagre array of familiar stars marking now the spring heavens—Leo's sickle, with Regulus set like a diamond at the butt of the haft; Virgo, with Spica occupying a similar position at the foot of the familiar Y; Bootes low down to the north and Arcturus flashing till it is time for him to disappear behind the hills; Corvus and Crater and Hydra lying away to the south, and an infinity of nameless jewels looking down from the depths of space overhead on the earth and its petty affairs, even as they shone

on this diminutive field of rye that would loom so large in the eyes of some when daylight came again.

The season, for once, seemed to be playing into the farmers' hands: there were alternating showers and sunshine all through April and part of May, and then there was a "drippy June" that ensured a heavy hay crop and, later on, a good growth of straw. And so, by mid July, none would have known that sheep had ever been over the rye, for it was five feet high, making soft music in the breezes that passed silently over it all day, and affording a play-ground for innumerable turtle-doves that had not been in England long.

Then it bleached quickly, and unlike wheat and oats and barley, lost all beauty, standing there merely as a fine crop of some worth and some utility, waiting for the cutters and self-binders.

These last were drawn out to the edge of the field one evening at the end of July, the two machines being at work upon it very early the following morning. Once again the weather was made for the job. A hot wind blew from

the south-east; the heat was intense, and a white glare reigned everywhere. The very straws seemed to crack and stiffen; the three horses drawing the heavy machines, with a boy on the leaders, sweating freely and requiring to be changed at midday.

The drivers were fairly tired out when they finally drew up at seven o'clock in the evening. The men employed stooking, or as they called it here, "shocking up," went on till nearly nine—that is, as long as they could see; and it was evident that this farmer meant to make the most of his opportunity while the crop was dry and dead ripe, and was also prepared to pay heavily for overtime.

By the following evening nearly the whole of the rye was down and half the field in shock; the doves busier than ever, flapping and fluttering everywhere, and taking heavy toll of the grain. The day had been just a repetition of the previous one, and the rattle of the cutters had continued without ceasing till late in the evening, their agitated arms showing high above the crop as they jerked out the trusses at every ten yards.

The only difference was that on this day another sound had been added to that of the busy machines. It came from the direction of the farmyard, half a mile away, and was wholly unmusical. Nature herself could produce nothing like it, for it was as though someone was fashioning a big drum made wholly of iron and tin and employing several men to beat it without ceasing—till, in fact, all the neighbourhood wished, in local parlance, “that them ther’ fellers, yonder, would give over.” The noise could be heard all over the farm and much beyond it, and if some were irritated by it, there were others who considered that it carried with it a reflection, if not a direct attack, upon themselves.

Here was one, for instance, Nat Organ by name, who was certainly numbered among these last. He was walking across the rye field with stiff gait, smoking a short clay pipe. There was nothing remarkable about him: he was of small stature and bandy legged, wore corduroy trowsers, carried his jacket on his arm, this hot day, and had a somewhat battered straw hat with a very broad brim

upon his head. It was evident from the way he moved that he was well on in years, and this was confirmed when he came nearer, and his face and neck were seen to be scored with many lines, and the skin of his hands to be shrivelled. He had come along to see how the cutting was going, and having marked one he had long known tucked in on the shady side of one of the shocks, with a truss put crossways above his head to add to the shade, was now making his way to join him.

“Well, Nat; so you are about again,” said this last, when the old man was within ear-shot.

“No fear,” came the answer; “got a job on to-morrow, and along o’ some o’ this here,” and Nat poked the nearest shock with his stick, drew the pipe from his mouth, and looked across the already bleached stubble in the direction of the farmstead. Then he spat and returned the pipe to his mouth, after which he sat down with the sun full on the back of his neck: he did not seem to mind it.

“By to-morrow night, a part of this ’ll be

threshed out. I'll begin drawin' the straw, come Monday. Ah!—quick work. Let's see. Begun cuttin' yesterday; finish first thing to-morrow mornin'. All the shuckin' up 'll be done by midday. Then they'll begin hauling by two; and er means to thresh out a bit as it comes. Wants some straw for the hayricks; and this here be dead ripe, bleached pertty near white, bain't it? Been at it afore, hadn't er wanted to finish er's hay first. I overhear'd un order fire to be lit in th' engine, so I knows it's right—ay, and what's more, he said as if I wer able, I wer' to have the job of them two five and twenty tonners yonder."

Nat Organ was known far and wide as the best thatcher of his day. He was past regular work now, being much hampered by the rheumatics; but he was glad of a job at his old trade in summer time and early autumn, especially as he always said that "idleness was a deadly thing for rich or poor, and there was no use in them as was everlasting on the nifle¹—not a mossel."

¹ Idling, or "loafing"; sometimes, "on the nifling pin."

Among his mates his character had always stood high, and these would say of him: "Ah, now; ther' be Nat ther'—he be a deadly man for a job—desp'ert he be; and the awkwarder it be, the kinder he do take to it, seemin'ly!"

Perhaps Nat was aware of such estimate for, old as he was, he went his way possessed of a certain independence of manner, at the same time holding opinions, the correctness of which he never doubted, because, as he would from time to time aver, he had arrived at them by means of his own unaided judgment and experience. In his younger days he had been reckoned witty as well as wise, and if he had now lost much of the former, he had still, on occasions, a funny way of referring to current topics that caused his mates to remark when they heard his words repeated: "Now, that be just one o' old Nat's; ah—it be a rare job to get upsides with he, especial when he've made up his mind."

"Nice noise they're a-making over yonder," he jerked out, after gazing intently towards

the farm, his eyelids screwed up tight in the glare. "I says as every blow of them hammers knocks a nail in a coffin, and marks the death of a good trade—and one as I've followed, too, since I picked un up from mi father, an' he took me on as thatcher's boy, or prentice to un.

"And since them days, I've thatched for every farmer on the Manor, and done every cottage roof on the place, and pretty near all the barns and sheddin' as wanted it—ay, and till the time come when straw was that ther' dear as it cost years on years o' rent to do one cottage roof alone, and, seemed like being just fearfu' waste of good money. Ah; do it all now, I would, though they says as I be old and too rheumaticky. But the gaffer do know right enough. Haven't he give me the job of them two new hayricks? Course he have—and he knows, same as I do.

"There, listen to 'em," he continued. "They're rattlin' on them corrugated iron plates as though 'em were tiles; and a girt, girt place it's a-goin' to be—Dutch barn, or French barn, or summut, they calls un:

they furriners be bound to be at bottom of it, 'wever, same as usual. Come a few year, and there won't be so much as a thatched rick in the country—or thatchers either, anywheres. Ah, you'll live to see it—you mark my words—if I can't expect to be about a lot longer myself."

The old man took a pull or two at his pipe before he continued again: "There was Dick Pegler a-sayin' t'other night as, from what er could see, it wer' about time as he and I, and folks of our years and experience, wer' cre-mated. I says to him, I says: 'Go on with yer,' I says, 'and you may leave me out where the cre-matin' is in question: I wants none o' that: all as I wants is to be put three feet under ground, and no more, when the time comes; and then I'll know as I'm benefittin' the land on the top o' me still, and some un with it.'

"He only laughs at what I did say; but Stainey, as was along, says: 'Well, well, to be sure; an' perhaps you be right there arter all'—and he don't talk very fast, don't our Stainey."

An hour later, Nat and that other were down by the river in the cool, getting willow-rods together for the rick pegs, splitting the sticks down the middle, and then quartering them again ready for the thatching in a day or two, while the old man told of some of the mysteries pertaining to what will soon be a lost art in most districts. Changes are many on the land, and it is well that they are, for competition is keen and profits are drawn very fine. There is no room for the waste noticeable in the old days ; there is a place for every truss and every bolten ; and if what will go to make the one can be got into the hayrick quickly, the other is not to be thrown away on thatch, but turned to more profitable uses. Thus, the covered yard and the French barn are in evidence on even the smaller farms, and thatched ricks and thatched cottages are being replaced by repellent corrugated iron in the one case, and cheap tiles or even smug slates in the other.

Nat Organ referred to all these and many other things as he split and quartered his rick pegs and trimmed the spurs down a bit.

"Ther's no need to cut 'em too long," he said. "For hayricks, I likes 'em from two foot to two foot six; but for wheat and that, pegs shouldn't never be less than three by rights. Then again, ye see, there be this—the thick end should allus be sharpened and t'other end cut off square, so as it don't injure yer hand when you come to thrust it into rick roof. And never you get your pegs too thick, lest you make a bigger hole than you needs in the thatch: you'll get the wet in else."

"But there, what's the use of my a-learnin' the likes o' you? You haven't a-got to live by it; and so far as I can see, from these furrin' plans as is comin' in, and the nonsense talked at home, it be a girt mercy for ye that yer haven't, or you'd very certain starve. Job to get a thatcher's boy now; they don't want to learn it, and what's more, sees as there's no partic'lar call for it—or won't be soon."

"Same along o' the yelmin'.¹ My missus, God bless her, did allus come yelmin' for me; and former times, hereabouts, it was reckoned

¹ Gathering the handfuls of drawn straw, preparatory to thatching; sometimes, "helming."

'oomen's work. It wer' just proper work for a 'ooman, too, it wus, an' 'tw'er' done this way —same as I'll show you, come Monday, when us can get to draw the straw. They did go down on their knees, with the straw laid in front of 'em, and with one hand in front o' t'other, did draw out the straws towards 'em. Well, when you've got as much draw'd that way and cleaned out with the fingers at the ends, as you can clasp round with your two hands, that be a yelm.

"Then you lays one this way and t'other that, crossways—two together, by the rick, so as 'em can be counted and carr'd up to him as is at work. And what the 'oomens was paid for that ther' was twopence a score, or four bundles o' yelms, as we do call 'em, for the twopence. But you don't see the women at it now, no fear; and after a bit"—and Nat removed his hat to scratch the top of his bald head—"you won't see . . . ah, well; perhaps not. But I reckons with what we've got in the yard, we've got about of enough of these pegs for the present time."

What Nat Organ had said turned out to be

quite right, and the following afternoon two brightly-painted waggons were out in the rye field, being loaded by the farmer and his men. A wind had sprung up from the south-west and the sky was cloudless, but the heat was as great as ever. There was no sound of the big drum over at the farmstead. This was Saturday, and the men at work on the new barn had left at twelve, "not reckoning to do much *that* day." For the farm hands it was different: at this season they looked to make overtime, no matter what the day of the working week might be. Thus, as soon as the first waggon was loaded, the farmer and five of his men went off with it to the yard; and then, much to the surprise of some, there presently arose in that direction the pant and the hum of the steam-thresher.

The waggon had been drawn up close to the machine, and a volume of black smoke from the engine was being carried off by the hot south-west wind. A man quickly climbed to the top of the load with a fork, and began pitching the sheaves one by one to two others standing ready on the feeding-board. The

first of these took the sheaf in his arms and passed it over to his mate, who ripped the twine with a knife as he cast it into the drum. Precisely the same movements were repeated again and again, and in the dust and the smoke and the heat, these men in their white shirts, tossing the bleached sheaves in this way, might have been jugglers ball-playing to the music of the thresher's hum.

It was soon a busy scene. A pile of straw began to grow where it was shaken out at the back of the thresher after the ears had been stripped of grain, and this was quickly tackled by three men with long forks, who started building it into a rough rick close by. Then an old horse came round the corner drawing water for the engine: the fires were made up, a fresh volume of black smoke rose from the tall chimney, and the note of the thresher dropped half a tone, from A♭ to G.

And just then, too, as if the change of key awoke fresh memories, one of the men, more musical than the rest, began a plaintive kind of tune, and continued to whistle it over and over again. Possibly it was one he had picked

up at the village revel the week before: the rest of the men stopped talking; one looked up with a grin, as though he recognised it, and some of the others smiled. The whistle carried a long way, for it was high pitched—an octave higher than an ordinary whistler's compass—the thresher humming a continual accompaniment with its two deep notes, in the dust and the smoke and the dancing heat of the July afternoon.

By five o'clock half a dozen waggons had been brought in and unloaded, and the loose, rough strawrick had grown till it was almost as high as the hayricks close by, that Nat would be thatching on Monday. Even the pile of cavings was up to the top of the thresher's wheels. A man was busy raking them away, and a string of white ducks, accompanied by a few venturesome fowls, waddled up to see what might be gathered there. Then, of a sudden, and as if by mutual consent rather than definite order, the band was thrown off the driving wheel, the engine stopped, and the hum fell to a low groan and slowly ceased. All the straw that

Nat would want was in the great loose pile that would be half its height by Monday ; and someone took a bucket and threw water over it from the engine's water-butt, by way of aiding the thatcher later in his task.

The men wiped the sweat from their foreheads, glanced at the work done, and went their way. It was past five o'clock on Saturday afternoon, and the toil of a hot week was ended. Only the farmer remained with the man who had charge of the machine ; and when the fire had been raked out of the engine, these two began putting the thresher and engine to bed under their respective tarpaulins.

“Not a bad sample of grain, and a very nice bit of straw that should suit the old man well,” remarked the farmer ; to which the engine-man agreed. “He’s been a good one in his day,” he went on, “no better, and will do a rick with less than any man I’ve ever seen. The only thing about it now is that it’s an everlasting job, and makes one fear sometimes that the wet’ll get in afore he’s done.”

“ ‘Tis a kindness, though, to give it him,” remarked the engine-man.

“ Don’t know nothing about that; but it pleases the old man, anyway. Can’t a-bear to feel dependent, can’t old Nat. Why, when he’s laid up with his rheumatics, and you know, for certain, that he wants a little of this or that, you’ve got to be just about particular or you’ll be certain to offend him: got to do it on the sly, like, and pretty well ask his acceptance as a favour.” The farmer was tugging at a tarpaulin rope at the front of the engine.

“ Ther’ be some like that,” put in the engine-man again.

“ Ay—still. Why, the other day, I says to him—‘ Nat, why ever don’t you put in for your old age pension? You be over time a long way.’ And what kind of answer do you think I got? Just this and no more: ‘ Danged if I does! ’ ”

The engine-man laughed. “ There’s queer folks about, to be sure,” he said.

“ This be my assistant,” remarked Nat

Organ, by way of introducing his mate—a young man busy wetting straw, preparatory to yelming. Nat had been tucking the rick since the early morning—pulling the sides with the hand—and had nearly finished it.

“You see,” he explained, “when a rick be well tucked, the bottom be much in from the eaves: the gaffer will have ‘em like that, and he be quite right. There’s plenty of holes up on the roof as wants fillin’, I can see, and then there ’ll be the ridge ’ll want building up a bit. Hayricks do always sink wonderful, and swig-swags about, too, for the matter o’ that.

“But, oh dear, oh dear!—see that rick o’ mine yonder, t’other side of them three round wheatricks? Ah—I did thatch all o’ they, last season. But just look at that un now. Tucked as nice, so as his sides wer’ like walls—though leaning ones, to be sure; and then Harry goes and leaves the paddock gate open, and that ther’ old grey nag, as ought to be shot, come in and played the very dooce wi’ it, a-nibblin’ all along the sides, see? There, I did warm him for that, I did; it wer’ shamesfu’.”

A thatcher's outfit does not amount to much, and Nat's lay on the ground close by. First there were a number of balls of rough twine, which it is the business of the farmer to find, together with the pegs and all materials, though by ancient custom the thatcher has always to sharpen his own pegs. Then came Nat's properties, consisting of a short hand-rake, fashioned out of half a hayrake, with the teeth cut to three inches and sharpened, a paring knife, a pair of sheep shears, a large thatcher's fork, two pieces of old carpet for kneecaps, and a small square of leather on a thong, which Nat always wore on the palm of his right hand, to save wounding it when thrusting in the pegs. "It be a lot better than the 'oden mallet as some do use—a lot better, and mi father did always use the like," he explained.

"And a prime thatcher wer' mi old father, too," he continued, tucking the rick as he talked. "When I began a-learnin' the trade of he, he did always have two assistants to wait on him, same as I always had myself, later. We was paid, then, same as we is now

—a shillun a square of ten feet by ten feet, the thatcher a-settlin' with his own men hisself. Early times, they didn't give as much—six-pence to eightpence for straw ricks, to ten-pence for wheat and that, and hay. But it got to a shillun, and ther' it be now.

“How much could us earn? Well, maybe I'll tell yer. See them wheatricks yonder, again? The staddles on which 'em do stand measures six yards across, and they be ninety-six feet round the eaves, and twenty feet from that to the top, so us reckons as there be a trifle over nine squares on the roof. A thatcher, such as I, or what mi father wer', with two men to wait on us and do all the work with the yelming and the pegs, would bustle about proper to thatch two ricks of that size well in a day. And if he wer' a careful man, he shouldn't use above three-quarters of a ton of straw, such as we've got here, for the job, though, to be sure, with rye you do want a lot more of it than when you be using wheat straw.

“O' course sometimes us didn't do so much—perhaps not more than a rick and a half.

At other times us did more. Why, I can call to mind when I was thatcher's boy and helped at it, as we've done a rick afore breakfast —that be, startin' at five and carryin' on till half-past eight. O' course the yelms wus ready ; and I could nip up and down a ladder with 'em sharpish, them days.

“ But ther', you do know—things in these times bain't a-done to last as 'em used to wus ; nor wanted to, as far as I can see. Why, former times, a farmer did often reckon to keep his wheat in rick for as much as a couple o' year. Now, it be all threshed out when the rent-day's in sight, and yards be mostly empty by time as next harvest do come round. It ain't always so with our gaffer here, I knows ; but it be with many. And had 'em acted that way when I were younger, there's plenty would a-twisted up their mouth, like, when going by, and have passed the remark to their neighbour : ‘ Well, to be sure ; I wonder what's wrong with his money, then—somethin', for certain. ’

“ But it ain't perhaps wonderful, these days, as 'em don't want to spent no money as they

can help on such work as we be a-doin' here: times be mortal different: not half the straw's grown: and many on 'em is busy lookin' round for someun else to save 'em altogether."

"Ah! listen; there 'em be, at it again, t'other side o' barns, and quite near enough, too. Runned short o' plates, I understands; but I seen a fresh lot come in, now just, so they'll be after givin' the whole parish the headache very shortly, same as last week."

Nat called to his mate to come and help him move the long ladder. The tucking all round the rick was finished, and it was time to get on to the roof, to fill in hollows and comb down. It was necessary to lay the ladder perfectly level with the roof, and when this was done Nat went up to have a look round.

"We'll soon set that right with the tuckings and rakings and that," he said, on coming down and pointing to a hole where the rick had fallen in from heating. "There's plenty as says as you must mind to put a bolster of tied straw all along the ridge. That be nonsense, and what's more, I knows as, oftens, it be downright waste. Top up and make

up your ridge with your rakings and that, and don't throw another's good money away."

A little later Nat had begun operations. There are many ways of beginning the thatching of a rick, whether it is oblong in shape like a hayrick, or round as in the case of those of wheat and other straw crops. Nat was of opinion that the place to begin, in the case of the former, was at one of the ends, though some might prefer the middle. "Finishin' off don't show, under my plan," he explained.

When he had chosen his place, he went up with his first lot of yelms, his helper subsequently keeping him supplied. Taking a yelm, he twisted the ear end of the straws into a ball and thrust it well into the hay just above where the eaves would be, continuing the line as far as he could reach. Then the second row was laid in the same way; the ends of the straw being as close to the eaves as was necessary, for them to be held down later by the bottom string. The lower line of pegs was subsequently thrust in a foot apart, the string, which was on a ball with a stick run

through it so as to lodge it handy to the thatcher on the roof, passing from one peg to another and being tied to each with a builder's knot, or clove hitch.

"There's two things you've got to mind partic'lar in thatchin'," Nat explained, talking to that other standing just below him on the ladder, "the one be always to shut your yelms well in; and t'other, to put your pegs in level—same line as the ground. Ther's plenty lays their yelms on top o' one another; while others, careless like, do put their pegs in slanting up or down, or no matter how. Such carryings on be fatal to a rick: the wind do blow the straw off, in the one case: and they pegs says to the rain, same what they gipsy folk sings out at our revel: 'This way, gents, for them as wants to get inside.' Why, them pegs, put in slantin' down'ards, do just act like a lot o' drains for the water, bless yer.

"Then again, see here—there's no call for you to get and put your pegs in so frequent when you comes to the next line above this un; though you gets 'em a little closer as you works up, same as you do the lines theirselves.

About of a six lines be a plenty for so be a ordinary stack, the top un being run close against the ridge, and the pegs ther' the nearest o' all—say, six inches apart, be about right.

“And its just the ridge where some do make their worst mistakes. You must lay the straw ther', well cocked up, minds, so as to run the water off. And it ain't amiss to place some of your pegs in first, just as you does in exposed parts, puttin' 'em crossways, like. The ridge and th' eaves be the two principal parts in all thatchin'; but it be the layin' o' the straw, right through, as wants the care. It got to be done wi' judgment, see? And what haven't, for the sayin' o' that?”

Nat was using his short rake to rake out the yelms lightly along the stelch, or length, he had done, and to beat down the straw and make all ship-shape. He did not attend to the ridge till all was finished, when he would use the shears, as he said, “with their handles held right up'ards, so as you can cut down'ards with 'em: 'tis the only way to make a proper job.” Then the whole roof

would be carefully cleared of all trimmings and made to look its best; the eaves being left to the last.

"And them eaves be terrible important," he would say. "By rights, if so be you've laid th' yelms right, the straw should be a'most double thickness ther'. I can tell in a minute, bless yer, whether a booby been at work or no, just as anyun may tell as a booby have been about when pegs along one stelch, or width between the strings, be in line with those above 'em. Why; what do that mean but the rain making a drain from one row to another right down the roof, and finding its way again into a farmer's rick?

"Half of 'em now don't know their trade, yer see. There's a lot to be learnt in thatchin', though some says as it's to be picked up easy. I knows better nor that. A man ain't a-goin' to trim his eaves proper wit'out practice and judgment. First, you must pare 'em careful with your draw knife, and then you must go in with the sheep shears, being very partic'lar to hold 'em same level with the ground, cutting always towards the rick; and you won't want

to take off a lot if your yelms have been laid as 'em should a-been.

"Ay; there's a lot o' rubbish talked; but this is what I says. Push in your yelms and shut 'em in well, and do the best as you can from the first; but never you fancies as your thatch be not a-goin' to let the wet in, nor warrant as it won't. I knows as not one in fifty thatches 'll kep it out altogether; and I be certain as it won't when snow be in question, for that do allus sobble into 'em proper."

It was the afternoon of the second day of the work when Nat reached the last side of his rick. He invariably regarded every rick as his till he had finished it, and as something that no one had a right to interfere with—not even the farmer himself. Was he not the best thatcher in the county, and proud of his work? "If I be to be trusted," he would say, "there's nothin' more to be said; and if I bain't—why, get someun else."

Then again, he would often remark when talking of thatching: "There be those as thinks theirselves clever when they gets their thatchin'

done bi contract, and by such as takes all the ricks in the yard at, maybe, five and sixpence apiece ; but sometimes it happens as the winter comes along and tells 'em as they was a little bit out in their reckonin'. Some ricks be more difficult nor others, as anyun may see, just as some is more steeper than others and wants less straw accordin' ; but, however such may be, you've got the sky above you, minds—summer and winter, and all seasons—and ricks is ricks and straw's straw, all said and done."

Difficulties, when they arose, were nothing to him, and often when the weather played him false, and things went wrong with the work just as it was nearly done, Nat Organ never lost heart or showed signs of giving in. With him it was always—in Robert Browning's line—"So one fight more, the best and the last!" The character he had earned was that he was "a deadly man at a job" ; and he was destined to show this now, though it might be for the last time in his long and honest life.

The farmer had come by earlier in the day, and asked Nat what he thought of the weather ; to which he had replied : "Ther's going to be

a change and a break up. The wind be puffy, I can find, now I've come round to this south side of my rick. We're in for a tempest, I'm thinking, and afore so very long." He did not stop in his work; but called to his helper to keep on with his yelms, and to charge the thatching fork with a lot and bring it up in case he might want it.

Clouds were gathering in the south behind the woods, the air was sultry, and the wind had dropped altogether, though now and then there came an eddy that toyed with the loose straws lying round the rick, carrying them high in the air to let them fall some distance away. The light of the sun seemed to be partially eclipsed and shadows grew fainter; and at the same time silence fell upon the world, save for the hammering on the new Dutch barn of which everyone had grown so tired. That never ceased, and latterly had grown worse; one of the firm having called that morning and stirred the men up, time being the essence of this contract.

A dove was purring in the willows by the river, and another answered from across the glassy water that was flowing in a sluggish

stream. No birds sang: it was the wrong time of year and the wrong time of day; but those that were on the move flew silently, as if they sought shelter from something that they dreaded. A party of yellow buntings arrived in the yards quite suddenly, and then a yaffel laughed loudly as he took an undulating flight across the home paddock, his cheery voice, for once, sounding quite out of place. And all the while thunder-clouds continued to pile themselves up and to mount higher and higher into the sky. The light of the sun was shrouded altogether. Nature was waiting for something. Flowers were drooping and all things wanted rain; the spell of hot weather had lasted many days. Then a low rumbling was audible, a long way off, and a pheasant crowed in the woods. At the same time, a puff of wind came from the opposite direction, slammed one of the barn doors, and set up a rustle in the trees.

“It’s coming, right enough,” remarked Nat’s helper.

“Maybe as it be; just bring up another of them forkfuls, then, and kep on at that

—I shall be after wanting they presently, I reckons.” The old man was working quicker: the end of the rick, where he was lying out on the ladder, faced direct towards the coming storm.

He had hardly finished his sentence before there were further rumblings in the heavens, and from two directions at once. The storm was evidently going to be a severe one: the clouds had lost all beauty of form; the sky had turned indigo, with lurid patches here and there, and with a ragged, lead-coloured fringe low down, betokening rain. For the time, beauty was shut out, and limitless power was coming to occupy her place. There was going to be war in the heavens; and things on the earth, while they watched, were about to feel their insignificance.

For a moment there was silence. The air had turned quite cold. Suddenly the dark mass that seemed to shroud the whole earth was riven by a flash, jagged as a broken egg-shell. The silence seemed to deepen for many seconds after that; but it was broken at last, and there followed the solemn voice of the

thunder, echoing among the more distant clouds till it and they were weary.

It was time for everyone to seek shelter. The hammering on the Dutch barn had already ceased, and the men had made their way to the old shed that stood over against where Nat was working. No one was visible in the yards. The poultry were crowding into the wane house, and the string of white ducks waddled round to the other side of the wheat-ricks and disappeared from view.

A few drops, heavy as lead, had already fallen on the thatch at Nat's side, causing him to look up as he heard them patter down. There was still time: the storm would not be overhead just yet: this end must be finished, somehow, and the wet kept out. Such were the thoughts that appeared to be occupying the old man's mind.

One of the other farm hands came running across at this moment, with his jacket thrown over his shoulders, and called to Nat that the farmer wanted him to come in. But Nat only looked down and said nothing in reply, which made the messenger feel foolish. He was

getting up to the ridge, and his figure stood out clearly against the lurid background of the sky. Rain was beginning to fall in earnest, and the new thatch was getting its first wetting.

Nat's coat was at the foot of the rick, and he was in his shirt-sleeves. He looked down at the old, tattered garment for a moment, and then felt in his waistcoat pocket, drew out a short wooden pipe, and gripped it tightly between his teeth. It was, of course, quite contrary to his principles to smoke when at such work as this, and he was not going to do so now; but the mere fact of sucking at a cold pipe seemed to help him in what lay ahead for him to do. Only once after that did he as much as glance over his shoulder, and this was when he wanted to see where his mate was. He grinned when he noticed that the man had crept beneath the threshing machine that, covered with its tarpaulin, stood where it had been left on the previous Saturday.

"Don't you take no harm, you minds," he called, removing his pipe from his mouth for

a moment—"it might hurt yer!" Nat's words and a louder peal of thunder made the man take the hint: he ran for the shed close by, and Nat was left alone.

The rain was coming down harder than ever. The old man's shirt-sleeves were soaked through and were clinging to his bony shoulders, while the water was streaming from the broad brim of his old straw hat. He was working as hard as he had done when forty years younger: every movement was quick; and he was shutting in his yelms one after the other and driving his pegs home with the leather on the palm of his hand, in a way that showed a lifetime's practice.

The townsmen were watching him from the shelter of the shed, and as Nat's mate joined them, one remarked, "What abaht that ould fool up there? He'll get struck, if he doun't mind."

"I doun't know abaht the fool part of what yer sai," returned another, slowly; "but ther' hain't no daut abaht the dainger."

Another figure was seen running across the yard. It was the farmer, clad in a mackintosh.

"Come down off there, I tell yer!" he called, "or you'll get struck!"

In the hurly-burly that was going on—the repeated claps of thunder and the heavy rain—Nat had difficulty in hearing what he said; but divining the farmer's words, he sung out: "I don't believe as a drop o' water have got in yet. I'll a-done after a bit, see?"

"Well; come down, I tell yer!"

"What, and leave my rick to get a sousing—no fear!"

"I don't care a damn about the rick: just you come down!" called the farmer, his anger evidently rising.

"Danged if I do till I've finished," came the answer from above; and Nat went on with his work, leaving the farmer to say what more he liked.

It seemed hopeless to do anything with a man like that. The farmer knew well whom he had to deal with, and with a "Well; have it your own way—I've warned you," which never reached Nat on the rick, he gave it up and made his way back to his house. The men in the shed laughed.

"There's no doing anything with him," he explained to his wife. "Why, bless you, he looks upon the rick as his own, and seemed quite hurted at my interfering. He's always been like that. Just ask the men; they'll tell you the same—old Nat have ever been a deadly man at a job, if he is fated to be struck to a cinder now."

The farmer's wife put her hands to her eyes to hide out such a possible eventuality, and at the same moment a brilliant flash lit up the whole room, followed by a crash that sounded as if the roof of the house had been stripped off or had fallen in. The farmer left at once to see what had happened; but his wife ran to the window to look towards the rick.

It was difficult to see anything clearly, with the rain streaming down the window-panes; but to her dismay she made out at last that the figure she had watched working on the tall ladder, these two days, was now no longer to be seen. With a choking sensation in her throat, she ran out of the room and mounted the first flight of stairs.

"There's no one on the rick," she called,

breathlessly, to her husband on the floor above ; “there’s no one on the rick ; Nat Organ’s struck, man—run !”

“I knew’d how it ‘ould be,” returned the farmer, coming down and seizing his hat : he did not wait now for other covering.

As he opened the door, the sound of cheering smote his ears. It was repeated again and again, and came from the direction of the old shed, over against where Nat had been working. He reached his garden gate and stood for a moment looking across the road, where the rain was making the gravel dance : a clap of thunder came from farther away ; the previous one had been the worst.

Once again, as he stood there, the cheering was renewed. There could not be much wrong where there were such sounds as those. Then he realised their meaning.

The small figure of a man, with nothing remarkable about him, was walking across the flooded yards, his coat slung over one shoulder and a short pipe between his teeth. It was old Nat, wet to the skin ; and the men from the Dutch barn were cheering him.

He was walking straight past them, at some distance, without turning his head, as if what was going on had no reference whatever to himself. But when the farmer hailed him, and shouted some remark that he did not quite catch, he called, in reply :

“ It be all shut in, and won’t take a lot o’ hurt now : I’ll attend to ridge and eaves, come the mornin’.”

Then he went out on to the road that led past the remaining shocks of rye, standing soaking in the fields, with his clothes clinging to his body and raindrops dripping from his hat.

The worst of the storm was over. Light was showing in the sky to windward ; though in the north, where thunder still rolled sullenly, the landscape and the heavens were indigo blue. Beauty and peace would return ere long —in the distance was a double rainbow.

The war was over ; and as Nat reached the cottage where he lived alone, asking help of none, a pale gleam of sunlight travelled over the rain-washed fields, and cast the old man’s shadow on his cottage floor.

V

BATTLES O'ER AGAIN

THERE were five of us, and this was our time and place of meeting.

It was St. Martin's Day and three o'clock in the afternoon, and St. Martin was celebrating his summer, destined, as often, to last just one day and no more. With the morrow would come again, in all likelihood, the drip of autumn, the familiar drifts of sodden leaves in the woods, the drenched grasses in the open, and Nature falling asleep with tears glistening on her lashes. Behind then, for good, would lie the summer with all its wealth of treasured recollections, and the unseen power would be declaring the old familiar truth, that all things here must change. The tops of the elms would turn more golden daily as if by touch of fire, the beech blood-red, the aspens to amber, the maples to flame; and once again

there would be the eternal evidence of the cycle that is destined to pass for all time from that which is good to that which is hard, and then onward again from the hard to the supremely good, and the rest and peace that shall accompany it.

There was a certain reflection of this in the talk of four here present, no less than in the general atmosphere of their lives, the fifth contenting himself with listening and not venturing to say much, however frequently he may have been in the habit of spending an hour with each and all of these as intimate friends of many decades' standing.

The spring and summer and much of the autumn of the lives of this company—just as with others living in the adjoining buildings, and none of whom were less than seventy years of age—lay very certainly behind, till now, in the end, when winter was close ahead and days grew visibly shorter, they and those others had come together here, one by one. All were old, and some were broken down; but in these almshouses, each was well sheltered from all that was hard

in future; and, though they did not trouble their minds greatly on this score, peace and beauty were lying now just over the adjacent border, for each and all, in God's good time.

Possibly no more perfect site could have been chosen in all England than this upon which the founders settled when they had it in their hearts, two centuries and more ago, to benefit their poorer fellow-men. This was it now. A wide expanse of fine, short, virgin turf, level as any lawn, something between a heath and a common, with stretches of gorse and bracken fern and tall foxgloves flourishing luxuriantly on its gravelly soil, with giant oaks spreading wide their limbs, and with sometimes sheep, at others a herd of Alderneys, beautiful in colour as any fallow deer, grazing at will over the whole expanse. To right and left, great beech woods; in rear a group of thatched and tiled farm buildings, embowered in cherry orchards; and, in front, room for the eye to roam far, over five or more of England's southern counties.

The main buildings—set out on three sides of a square about an ample courtyard paved

with flint cobbles and brick-faced so as to catch the maximum of sun, and were separated from the heath by a low wall. The date of the whole was unmistakable, the steep roofs, massive chimney-breasts, and form of gable, declaring it to be the reign of Queen Anne. To right and left, the two sides of the great courtyard furnished each a row of comfortable tenements; and on the third, while further tenements had also here a place, the centre was occupied by a chapel where daily services were held for all who cared to come. A clock-tower rose here above the entrance door, on either side of which were ancient and comfortable seats, where those who were weary could come and sun themselves, on such a day as this, for instance, and hold converse while they sat, with the view of all those counties spread out for them to gaze upon between the stems and branches of the trees.

Behind the range of red brick buildings, beautiful in the colours that time alone can give, lay these old folks' gardens, divided by grass paths, each with its apple or pear or cherry trees, the whole enclosed by hedges

of clipped yew. And here, too, in a quiet corner, surrounded by a brick wall, perhaps two feet high—a sun-trap in its way—was a small grass square of consecrated ground, where roses and daffodils grew and birds built early, and where those were laid to rest who had no right of breaking ground elsewhere when their days were ended.

And lest these old folk might feel themselves lonely and cut off up here from the rest of the world, the founders had shown their wisdom and forethought by ensuring that a constant stream of young life should be in daily touch with them. Adjoining these almshouses were considerable schools, the foundationers of which were dressed alike—the boys in blue serge with brass buttons; the girls in scarlet cloaks and head-covering to match.

Thus daily, save in holiday time, a crowd of children assembled here from all round this purely agricultural district, to obtain their education, and what was of equal if not greater moment, to win health and strength for future years and what those years might claim of

them as English men and women. Here they could play their games throughout the seasons, in the high air that came unimpeded straight across those English counties from the distant seas or through the great woods and cherry orchards lying round—always out on their own short, level turf, where the gorse and the bracken grew strong and the great oaks spread their limbs—making the old buildings ring with the sound of their laughter and the prattle of their tongues, and bringing thereby many a smile to an old face, and rekindling many a recollection in the hearts of those who watched them.

The chapel door stood wide open on this St. Martin's Day, and of the party that had assembled round it, three were sitting together in the sun on one of the old seats, a fourth on one of the arms of the same, with another standing in front in his shirt-sleeves, his hands thrust deep into the ample pockets of his trousers, and with a short wooden pipe in his mouth. Willum Dawbey had just come in, after doing a little ploughing for the farmer of the farm at the back. He was tall and clean

shaven, and his face seemed to be wreathed in a perpetual smile.

"I like's a bit o' ploughin', when I can get at it, ye see, and it went nice to-day after the wet as we've had. Farmer yonder, got a man sick ; and I worked for he all my time, same as my father worked all his time for hisn's."

"Where was yer, Willum ?" asked a heavily-built man on the seat, with a badly-deformed left hand and foot. "In the Grove furlong, was it? Not allus a very kind piece, that bain't, and I've ploughed un, times—ay, and with a 'ooden plough, too." The speaker's name was John Lugge, but the others called him Jack.

"Ah! they 'ooden ploughs. You brings back summat to mind when you speaks o' they," broke in Jimmy Crowdy, with a thin voice, and a bad cough that he had never been known to be without. He was the oldest of the party, being eighty-five; and having lived in these almshouses twenty-one years, was somewhat deferred to by the others. If you asked him about his cough, he would

tell you "as it wus th' asthma," and that his father said that he had been born with it, adding that "breakin' the fresh ground up, ploughin', did used allus to affect his chesties and make him find of it worse."

But it was not only his age that gave Jimmy Crowdys his position among his fellows here. He was also known as "a great man to sing; and one who could sing all through the Psalms, beautiful, yet; and put the shame on the face of some in the doin' of it—that he 'ould!"

Oddly enough, it had always been the dream of Jimmy's life that he might end his days where he now found himself; and all through his boyhood, and right on through the years that followed, he had regularly attended the services in the chapel, at the door of which he was now sitting, and where he had sung, he would tell you, nearly eighty years.

"Ah! they 'oden ploughs," he repeated, swinging his legs, for being small of stature his feet did not touch the ground when sitting on this seat. "There's no un 'ouldn't go by me in a field with *they*."

“Folks 'ouldn’t look at 'em now,” interposed Dick Pegler, a keen-faced, white-haired man, sitting on his left and engaged in sharpening his knife on a strap.

“They 'ouldn’t look at many things as we was forced to,” returned Jimmy, with a cough. “What would 'em say to a turn-furrow made o’ beech, and the beam of a bit of ash or elm? They’d tell ye as they 'ouldn’t last more nor a twelvemonth, and there they’d be a’most right; but I knows as them there 'oden ploughs did do good work, especial’ in heavy ground. Didn’t do where there was gravel and stone: soon wored out then. But they slipped the dirt ever so much better, in soft ground: didn’t clog so much: didn’t have no wheels, yer see, so there was less to cling.”

“You be right there, Jimmy,” put in John Lugge. “I founds the same. I’ve been with 'em with six horses, lots o’ times, myself, and all workin’ in the furrow, though I allus says as six be too many—can’t work together, yer see, and treads it all together too much. Can’t do nothin’ with it then; and wants two boys along. Ay, but I been with they 'oden

fellers times and times on heavy land, I have ; and what's more, oftentimes in winters, when the ground did lie wet—an' I knows as they did better than the wheel ploughs then, a lot, they did."

John Lugge spoke in a deep voice, stretching out his deformed foot now and again, and tapping the boot with a stick he always walked with in his old age. His infirmities had not prevented him making his way in life. With his maimed hand and foot there were necessarily things he could not do, no less than others that he could ; but having begun at bird-scaring at seven years of age at tenpence a week, when "he could hop about the farm in a fashion," he came to be carter's boy, and from that, in the end, rose to be head carter, "with twelve horses to look arter," he would tell you, "and two under-carters and three plough-boys. It wer' heavy, four-horse land, over yonder, and I were responsible for the lot ; and ten shillun a week was the money, with a cottage free, as you may say, and a good master."

"And they ploughs weren't the only 'ooden

tools as we used, was 'em, Jack?" asked Willum Dawbey. "Why, see, now," he continued, as Lugge assented, "there was them 'ooden rolls, afore the iron ones come in. The worst of 'em was as they soon wor'd out quick, especial' when us had to take 'em, it might be, a couple o' mile along a road to reach a field. That took the middle part out of 'em sharpish; and then 'em did very middlin' work."

"But there was summut afore they, as you've forgot," remarked Jimmy. "Clod-beaters come about afore the rolls. Women and boys did use 'em—I did go along o' my mother at it, anyways—I knows that. Summut like a beetle¹ they wus, only with no iron rings to 'em, and about nine to ten inches long and made o' elm or beech. Not so very heavy, they wasn't; wi' a handle same as a prong but not so long as a pitchfork."

"Ah; I can minds 'em now," returned Willum; "and as many as seven and eight women in a field at a time wi' 'em, beaten' the clods proper and gettin' eightpence a day, or

¹ A large mallet used for driving wedges.

four shillun a week, for the job." And Willum proceeded to imitate how the tool was worked ; laughing himself, and making the others laugh.

"There *wus* times, then, to be sure ; and some rummish doings along," said Dick Pegler, turning round towards John Lugge, his hands upon his knees. "You talks o' ploughin', Jack ; but you never done what I done, and that be ploughin' wi' oxen."

"'Twarn't done our way, or I should ha'," returned Willum.

"Maybe as you 'ould ; but here, look. Where I was, at Byfords, us did ; and I had sixteen oxen to look arter. Plenty's the times as I've been ploughin' with they, and eight in the team, too, and a boy to drive. An' I'll tell ye what—us got through as much as th' horses. Done an acre and a half in a day, knockin' off at four. But us did them ther' oxen *well*, mind yer—filled 'em up with chaff and cavins¹—and when us knocked off plough, and two teams goin', mind yer, it wer' a perty sight to see 'em, for they oxen when 'em turned for

¹ Refuse from threshing (Ox.): in Glos.—rowens.

home did skip and play like good uns down the road, they did ; and wi' all the chains and that a-jinglin', like the pertiest music, Jimmy, as ever you've hear'd, I reckons."

"They oxen wus mortal slow, though," said Jimmy, by way of retort.

"Not so slow as you'd think for ; and kept on, they did. But where 'twus wi' they, wus just here—they took a lot o' room a-turnin', when us got to th' headland. And that be how it be as you can allus see where oxen been in use on a ground, for the lands do take a long curve, like, at th' ends."

The rest of the company appeared impressed with Dick Pegler's knowledge. He had capped the others, and the conversation dropped for a few moments. The clock overhead chimed the half hour ; and in the silence, the children's voices could be heard in the schools. An old woman in a blue cotton dress was sweeping the dust out of the door of one of the tenements farther off, and the men turned to look at her : she was a poor, bent old thing, with round shoulders.

"There be Mrs. Clist, at it again as usual : she be allus cleanin' up. I should judge as

Jonathan, her 'usbun', there, don't want a deal o' cleanin' hisself if she got anythin' to do wi' un—oh, dear!" Willum Dawbey always made a joke of everything.

"Be gettin' to look a bit old, be Jonathan," remarked old Jimmy—"do mostly read the Book now; and er been a truthful man. Went in and sat along wi' un last week when it did rain pourin'. Be got wonderful white, he have. We got a-talkin' about the food, for the butcher come along and left un four pen'oth a meat—and a nice piece it wur. He wus a-tellin' me as he wus one o' ten, and as bread wer' the staple when he wer' a child and taters summut of a lux'ry, being not in general grown by all folks, and swedes being often used by 'em, in his part. Nor wasn't wheaten bread, he says; but his mother did used to make a kind of a dumplin', like, wi' toppins, water and salt, and a few greens wi' it. He weren't very big then, or could' a-been, for he did say as when he had to get the collars on th' horses, he did have to clammer into mainger to do it. But ther', it weren't very different along o' we."

“Nor us,” said Jack Lugge, leaning forward and tapping the flint cobbles with his stick. “See here now. When I got married—and too young at that—us never had no tea to breakfast; it wer’ too dear. And us never used no coal neither, for it were the same—three shillun a hunderd, it wer’; and canal as brought it, ten mile off. What we had reg’lar was ‘ood, such as us got ‘oodin’—fir cones, stubble, and roots o’ beans, and often cowdung wi’ it, which went well. Our breakfasts wer’ just this—bread and lard, or bread and honey, for mi father kep’ bees, and I done the same; or sometimes it wer’ poridge made o’ flour and water, with onions and potatoes at times to give un a taste. Dinner was bread and cheese, for most part, with now and again a bit o’ bacon; for meat, along o’ we, were very seldom eat—very. And then come supper again. There was sopped bread for that, sweetened with honey, or gruel with treacle put with it. Breakfast was at 6, I minds, wi’ a bit o’ bread; sometimes a bit o’ cheese to take out in the field; dinner at 3; with supper again at 7. That’s how us planned it out.”

"And what for drink?" asked one of the others.

"Why, beer, to be sure; what the farmer made hisself. We did have so much allowed, according to time o' year—three to four pints, reckoned at one and threepence to one and six a week; but the price wus a penny a quart for the small beer; threepence for the ale; and the extra strong wus sixpence."

"But then that ther' *wus* ale, that wus, and no mistake," quoth Willum with a grin—"job was to get it!"

"You're right there," continued Jack Lugge. "Well, milk were a halfpenny a quart at times, and we did have some o' that then; and come Easter time, eggs was often a matter o' twenty-four a shillun, I can minds. And when money was better at piece work, we did have two ounces o' tea a week, and same o' coffee, though we did oftentimes make our own, or add to it, like, with roasted bread-crumbs. And come Sundays, my missus—the last, that is, what's been dead now long—did allus spread the table, Sunday mornings, wi' paper, to make a show, for we didn't use

no cloths, them days: 'twas her fancy, like."

"Dear, dear," said Jimmy, "'twas thought-ful, though, warn't it? But there was another thing, Jack, as you never said nothin' about, and what seems summut curious now: it wer' a treat to get a bit o' coal, as you says, and sometimes we did have as much as half a hundred a week; but what about them lights, winter times? Summer didn't signify a lot; but when them candles, or what we did call rush-lights, were tenpence a pound, there wasn't a lot o' light in our housen after dark—not a lot—and precious little of 'em was used according."

"No, that there wasn't," exclaimed two of the others.

"It wus a lot cheaper to go to bed," put in Willum, "and that's just where us went. But, Jimmy, look ye; you've never spoke much of one thing as I been watchin' for, and that's the cheese. Lord save us now, if that there weren't just hard enough! It wer' made o' skim milk, what us had, and you wanted all yer teeth, and pretty sound uns, too, pervided

yer mind wus set on tack o' that description.
'Twasn't exactly like the soap as you gets now!"

Willum threw himself back from his hips and laughed loudly, the others joined in, and old Jimmy at last succumbed to such a bad fit of coughing that one of the company considered for a time that this must of necessity be the end of him.

But Willum came and sat next to the old man on the arm of the seat, and then looked up with his smiling, weather-beaten face, and said: "Don't mean nothin', bless yer; we be used to it, and so be he: there's nothing to be a-fear'd on. You'll be singin' in here, come Sunday, Jimmy, won't yer?" he added, bending forward over the small choking figure, and pointing with his thumb over his shoulder.

"Dare say as I shall," returned the old man as if nothing particular had occurred, "done it eighty year; come Christmas, anyways."

The sun was getting lower, and the light was reaching far up the floor of the chapel through the open door. The old brickwork of the surrounding buildings was aglow with golden light, and the air was quite still. The

figures on the great clock in the tower caught the rays, and so did the colours of the arms of the founders of [this place of rest and peace, while just above these, cut deeply into a slab of stone and more easily read at the moment, ran the history of this old Foundation.

It had been placed there long years ago by those who wished the facts recorded, and told how one had given "all his estate to the discharging of poor prisoners for debt out of the Marshalsea Prison, and for the building and endowing of this House, which is for the maintenance of a Chaplain and Schoolmaster to it, and twelve men to be chosen out of the five surrounding parishes, with a nurse to attend them; and the remainder of his estate to put poor children out of the several parishes aforesaid to the School, and clothe them till they are capable to be put out apprentice, for which they are to have ten pounds each." And then, just beneath, in old lettering, were these further words :

Nisi Dominus Frustra

The old folk who, for generations, had gone

in and out here had never read any of it, for it was high up, all the s's were f's, as some termed them, few could read, and the last three words were apt to be dismissed as "no doubt the gentleman's name."

But if these last words now caught the eye of someone for the hundredth time, who had gone out into the courtyard at the moment to look at the clock, it was impossible for him to return to these four old men—fair representatives of the twelve who found a resting-place here—without being fully aware that had the English of the final words been mentioned, these men of a manly race—not mealy-mouthed, and wholly free of cant—would have looked up quickly, and muttered as if they meant it, "That's God's truth!"

The majority of their class cling to certain guiding principles very staunchly. Contentedness and a certain deep-seated trustfulness rule; and what comes to them is accepted and dismissed in the phrase so often heard amongst them—"Well, us have got to put up wi' it, s'pose;" not uttered in docility and meekness of spirit, for characteristics of the kind have

no place here: nor again, because such as these are without opinions of their own, or are incapable of forming them for themselves, as some would have us think. The folk here met with are often far shrewder than the man in the road supposes; and out in these fields, where such have spent their lives, there have ever been keen eyes, if silent tongues. Shrewd judgments have been formed, with foundations in experience; little suspected by those who know them not, and by no means lightly surrendered.

“Lord love you; look there!” exclaimed Willum, pointing upward with an outstretched arm, and breaking the silence that had fallen on the company after Jimmy’s fit of coughing.

Willum had walked away from the seat and was standing now, shielding his eyes with one hand, and looking up into the sky. “Just look, now. Did ye ever see such a lot of queesties as that? Well, well, to be sure. Why look, the string of ‘em be a quarter of a mile across, and stretches now right over White Lands Wood, and round over The Great Chalk like

specks, and beyond. Why, I reckons as there be more pigeons there than there be folks in England ; and they're a-coming still, see?"

"I be too middlin'-sighted to see 'em at all ; they be up too high for I," remarked Jimmy. "They taken to it of late, though ; be after the beech mast ; and Chaplain was a-sayin' as they do come from t'other side o' the world, or somewheres—and he do know, though I was a-tellin' him as there've been allus queesties about in my time."

"Us been talkin' of our vittals ; whose a-going to feed they?" asked Dick Pegler. "Feeds theirselves, do 'em? I should say as they helped theirselves. But my meaning is ; see the way they be a-goin' to punish the farmer. And it be hard lines if we be going to suffer for the furriners. Well, well ; ther' be no end to 'em, look."

Dick was perhaps a little better educated than the other three, and studied the weekly county sheet. Moreover, he was known to read the more solid portions of the same and to find interest therein, for when he had offered the paper on one occasion to his neigh-

bour, Elsby Vicke, wife of Almsman Vicke, telling her "it wer' remarkable interestin'," she had found that, so far as her perusal went, this assertion was not borne out by facts. She had therefore returned it to him, with a remark to this effect, and with the further addition that she "couldn't find no single murder in it nowhere." To which Dick had replied: "Maybe there ain't; but I bain't a-going to wrestle with ye over that."

"They'll be a bit too late to get a deal from the harvest fields this time, I reckons; 'tis all cleared and in rick, long agone, and some on it already threshed," remarked Jack Lugge, looking at the great flight of migrant pigeons that were still passing overhead, and continued to do so for many minutes.

"And there's not a great deal left on the ground neither, these days," returned Jimmy. "Why; I can tell ye what—that former times, when leezin'¹ was reg'lar custom and a field of wheat wus carried, me and mine did get as much as from three to four bushels not uncommonly, and worth to we from twenty-

¹ Gleaning.

five to thirty shillun, it wer', when threshed out and ground, for we did allus bake at home. Bread was one and six the gallon then; and wages nine shillun a week, and five on us in family. But us made it out, for there was as much as twenty pounds to be gotten at harvest time, some seasons—that be, with the family all at work—and that did help out nice against low wage, ye see.

“ And then again, there was a lot o' kindness showed—vittals and old clothes give away by the farmer. And I'll tell ye what is my belief, and it be this—as though shepherds and carters in this here county o' our'n be gettin' fifteen shillun a week and labourers thirteen, against our ten and eleven, I don't believes as they be such a lot better off than some of us wer'. There was a deal of overtime made then, and few machines, and the girls did sew gloves and make lace, what they don't do now. And then again, I says—there's plenty leaves the soil, these days, mainly 'cause they think some have done better for theirselves by a so doin', and others expects to; but for my

part, I very greatly doubts as many on 'em as goes be any better off in the main."

The rest appeared to agree; but Dick remarked: "You says as you done six days' work a week o' twelve hours, at nine shillun."

"So I did," said Jimmy.

"Well, I done seven for the same money; and I'll tell ye how. Didn't I walk nigh three mile out in mornings and the same home o' nights, and ain't that two hours on the road every day as comes? Well; put that together, and you've got another day to be added to the six, haven't yer?"

"That's right enough," said Jack Lugge, "and that come o' livin' off the place, and wer' unlucky."

"And so it wer'," returned Dick; "but I bain't a-going to say as it wus always so arter I got married and settled, for it went a lot better then. And for the matter o' that, mi father done the same, and bred up a family o' twelve childern he did, and never had a penny relief in his time nor asked any o' livin' soul; threshed with the flail every day, he did, in winter time, and walked three mile

to his work and same home. And the most as he ever earned wer' twelve shillun."

The conversation turned after this to old tools and old ways. The great flight of pigeons, and what they were going to pick up, had turned the minds of the company that way, and when one of the party referred again to leezing, and how they threshed out what they got on the barn floor with the flail, Jack Lugge affirmed that after such threshing was done, "there come the winnowin' with the fan. I could turn that, you see," he said, "and I'll tell ye what—I've oftentimes cleaned forty sacks of barley in a day with the help of another man, and a' ooman along. And so far as turning do go, I'll tell ye another thing—as with a three-knife machine, I've oftentimes cut a hundred and twenty bushel o' chaff in a day, and I believes now as, over at our place, I wer' the only man as could do it. It be all done by a old horse now, or else by steam."

"Daresay you was a good hand at that: well, I've hear'd tell as much," said Willum, lighting his pipe that had gone out while he

had been watching the pigeons. Then he asked: "Tell us, Jimmy; did ye ever see the four-horse thresher, your way?"

"I bain't a-goin' to say but what I didn't, and for years; done remarkable good work, it did."

"Well," continued Willum, "I wer' employed on it as a boy, and for long. Never seed one, didn't yer? Well, well, to be sure. It wus like this here. The machine itself did stand in the barn, and weren't over big—maybe four and a half feet high, or so. A shaft ran from that out into the yard, see, and it had a double spindle and what 'em did call a intermediate motion to un, 'cause the horses wouldn't move fast enough for it else, as you understands. Well, o' course there was the corn, and the chaff; and the cavings or short pieces o' straw, like. A 'ooman wus mostly employed to keep on rakin' out from under, and to do the siftin' to get rid of the cavings, the chaff being winnowed out with the fan later on.

"Then, outside, ye see, 'twas like this. Ther' was the four beams fixed crossways, and

a horse as was hitched to each of 'em went round in his place in a circle, like. And set up in the middle, where the beams did join, wer' a cage about of a two feet and a half high, made o' wire nettin', to stop that ther' boy as did stand ther' from fallin' into wheels below. O' course when I stood there myself, I had a whip, to keep the horses up to their job; but perhaps some 'ould think as the fun come in here, though I don't know so much about that myself.

"You must know as the carter inside the barn did have to feed the machine; and I daresay as you've seed plenty o' old barns with a bit of a little glass winder set in 'em, to one end, like. Well, that ther' winder wer' just to let him see what that ther' boy wer' after, and how he did keep the horses to their job. And many's the time, I can assure ye, as I've ketched it smartish from Jonathan Clist as wer' carter then, for he did give I a taste o' the strap if there was anythin' amiss;" and Willum laughed his usual laugh at the recollection.

"That be quite right," said Jimmy, ap-

provingly. "But I seen they four-horse roller threshers out in a field, times; and been boy myself to 'em. The most as we ever dealt with—and they did famous work, mind yer—was never above ten quarter a day—never more nor that. But they things be all done up, years back, and forgot."

"And with these here threshers now, same as you can hear a-buzzin' over yonder," added Dick Pegler, "they thinks nothin' o' doing fifty quarters in a day o' ten hours, sacked up and all. And just look what it wer' with us, and takin' the winnowin' alone. In my time, when us dressed and cleaned wheat with the winnower yonder, we did do well to get through three to four quarter an hour, and may be five quarter of oats, with three of us a-workin' at it—one to turn, one to feed, and one pullin' back. That there winnower of our'n did blow the chaff one way and grain t'other."

"Ay," continued Willum again, "and if it be barley as they be on to, all as they've got to do with the new-fangled things, be just to run on another band, and it do drop into a

hum'ler¹ and all the eyles² be cut off ther' and then. Very different to what it wer'. Why, look; ther' be one o' them hand-worked barley hum'lers over in the shed now, where I wus this mornin': and it did ought to be broke up, for it wus that des'pert hard to turn, though it be fair to say as it aren't been used these twelve year or more. But there was a tool I did use afore ever that there hum'ler come in, and that wer' the barley chopper. Didn't ye never see one o' they? It wus five blunt iron blades, like, set in a frame, with a half hoop over; and then there was a cross-handle above. I'll be bound I could put my hand on mine now, and as he lies up in the shed where I pitched un. It wer' heavy work, that. You had to keep liftin' him and choppin' hard down with him to cut the barley eyles off; and stand with your feets pretty wide apart, or you'd learn of it, and like enough be choppin' your own toes off along o' them eyles."³

¹ Hummeler—a hollow cylinder in which a spindle is fitted with transverse blunt knives.

² The local name for the awns, or terminating grass-sheath of barley.

³ The tool here mentioned is in the writer's possession, and weighs $8\frac{1}{4}$ lbs.

"That be just about it," added Jimmy, with a chuckle; "and the barley wer' laid down on the barn floor to start with, about of a six inches deep, and while you was a-stumpin' and a-choppin', another did follow after a-turnin' of it over wi' a shovel. The winnower come after that; all as the chopper done was to cut them eyles off."

"And what us did call the leaf fan, or sail fan," put in Jack, "was in use at that time, for the winnowin'; and I could turn that again nicely. Some places it wer' used for a'most anythin'. One did stand in front, shuckin' whatever it was in a sieve, and the wind o' the fan did blow the chaff and that away. But about these parts it wer' mostly used for cleanin' seed clover, trefoil or hop, and such as that—small seeds, like; and it did do nice work, too, I minds, especial winnowin' such as the turnip and the swede seed."

"It wer' just a girt high wheel to look at," continued Jimmy, "with a round bar or axle, like, with sticks fixed in him, and with girt pieces o' sacking stretched to 'em. It wer' turned with a handle, and 'er made a girt

draught of wind. Three did allus work the fan, and oftentimes it wus women done it. And I minds when our'n wer' broke up at the last, the Squire's good lady come along, and says as all that ther' sackin' wer' to be kept; and later, she did make aprons on it, and gave 'em about, she did."

The old men seemed to enjoy talking of the tools they had once used, and though they regarded them now with some amusement, they were evidently proud of their familiarity with things that many a younger man had never seen. In days long gone by, such tools and implements had played a prominent part in their lives; and when one of the company remarked that "they made some rare work wi' 'em, then, and no mistake," the words raised a smile on the faces of the rest.

The hard days for them were over now for good, and in this place of rest and peace they were ready to laugh at what had once been their lot, when sitting in the sun as they were doing now, fighting their battles o'er again. The fight for them had been the common battle of life, and a very real one; but the

wounds received had now healed over, and perhaps the last thing they would have thought of doing would have been either to draw attention or to complain of the scars. Something of the old spirit seemed to live with them still; and old Jimmy once summed it all up in a phrase.

He was endeavouring to chop up his quarterly allowance of firewood, and with but feeble arms. Someone had offered to help him tackle the larger pieces; but his reply had been this: "Thank ye, all the same; but I likes to do mi own work. I bain't a-goin' to turn baby at eighty."

"Ther' goes Chaplain, I can see," remarked Willum, turning on his heel and looking across the heath. "That do mean as it be just on four o'clock."

"Be goin' over to the School; that's wher' he be goin'."

"For sure," echoed another: "we shall hear 'em singin' in a minute; the air be that still."

No one said anything after that. The light of the sun, grown fainter now, had crept up

the floor of the chapel through the open door, and was shining full on the east wall, the simple altar there, and the painted balusters that did duty for altar rails in this building of a past age.

The great clock broke the silence at last by striking four; and just at the same moment came the notes of a familiar hymn.

“I sung that, times,” said Jimmy, beneath his breath.

“Listen a bit,” added Willum, “and there’ll come summut else.”

The old men could not hear the words very plainly; but they knew what they were, for all had been educated at the school, and in days when both school and education were very different to what they are now. The same words had been uttered for two centuries within these walls, and ended thus:

“. . . Let no harm happen to our bodies. Let no bad thoughts hurt our souls. Bless and keep us now and evermore. . . .”

“Amen,” added one of the old men, when the voices ceased.

Then there was the sound of the rush of

many feet coming out of the school buildings ; and in a moment, the heath was a busy scene. A crowd of children were running this way and that towards their several homes, filling the air yet again with the sound of their merry voices, flecking the smooth turf with colour, and adding life and movement, and the hope that belongs to the young, to the closing minutes of this St. Martin's Day.

The air was growing chilly ; the distant view had been swallowed up in the mists of the lower lands, and the sun no longer threw shadows of the great oaks upon the turf.

"I see my missus be a-beckonin' me to tea," said Jack Lugge.

"You be very lucky to ha' one," returned Jimmy ; and the party broke up.

VI

THE SEXTON AND THE CLERK

THEY were both new to their place. But there was nothing very remarkable about this. The vicar was the same: the church had only just been built, and he was necessarily therefore as new to his place as both the sexton and the clerk. In fact, everything here at this date was as new as well could be. Even the parish had not existed as a separate ecclesiastical entity until a maze of legal courses had been severally traced—Orders in Council been issued under the Queen's own hand and duly published in *The Gazette*; the Commissioners of the Bounty of another Queen been duly satisfied; the church consecrated; the new vicar comfortably installed in his new vicarage; the sexton appointed to pull the big bell in the tower; and the clerk to fill sundry offices in the body of the church. Then and not till then was all complete, and

this that was all new launched on the course that leads in such things to old age.

Looked at now, all this newness appears a long way back, and it is necessary therefore to inquire a little as to what had preceded it, and how it all came about.

In that part of the country, as the rest of the world knows, the parish of Middleham had always had attached to it the two considerable hamlets of Long Green and Uffham, the mother church of the same being so placed as to be distant full three miles from the more inhabited parts of Long Green, and nearly five from those of Uffham. The two hamlets were thus, in matters ecclesiastical no less than those educational, left somewhat out in the cold ; and hanging much together as they did, the inhabitants were not behindhand in recognising the fact. Nonconformity was practically unknown here. The people were all staunch church folk, and would have attended their parish church after their own manner, had that church, as they expressed it, "not been so mortal far away."

The whole district hereabouts was essentially

rural, though it was not so entirely cut off from the rest of the more active world as many a one elsewhere. The county town—or to give it its full dignities, cathedral city—lay four miles distant from the centre of Middleham. It is true that a wide river separated the one from the other, and that access to the town was only obtainable by the last bridge to cross its tidal waters. But while this made little difference to the majority of the inhabitants of the mother parish, it certainly added to the comparative isolation of the two hamlets, for as the name in a measure denoted, Middleham lay between them and the attractions and conveniences that the county town afforded.

Then there was another thing in these earlier times that had affected the hamlets closely. If they could boast no church of their own, they had always been able to point to the fact that the only considerable house in the neighbourhood stood in Uffham, and that they possessed in the owner of the hamlets a local Squire, whereas Middleham very certainly had none. But alas for their time-honoured boast! Churches may stand but families decay.

The old line of the Squires of Uffham was brought down to a single life, and when that life came to an end the thread snapped, and there was the end of that line. For many a year the Manor House stood empty, and for an equal number had it been offered for sale. Thus, the two hamlets came to realise that they were shorn of some of their former dignity, and felt themselves somewhat rubbed on the raw when the men of Middleham referred to their old-time boast, and moreover with their tongues in their cheeks.

Occupying the position that it did, many would have naturally supposed that Middleham must possess a church of some historic interest. Nor would they have been disappointed. About the building itself there was much that claimed attention, from the little Saxon window in the tower and the Norman arch that spanned the entrance door on the south, to the fourteenth-century tracery of the small window that graced the east end. Such possessions breathed of many centuries, if the walls inside were periodically whitewashed and could show no ancient cenotaphs or brasses.

Time, moreover, had dealt kindly with the whole, no less than the ignorant and interfering hand of the more modern man ; and Middleham Church, with shingle spire amid surrounding elms, was thus a peaceful and attractive spot to visit at every season of the year.

Half a century would, naturally, not be considered a long period when set beside the age of this church : but such a span counts for something in most human affairs, and at this period—the early 'fifties—the conditions that still ruled, so far as the services in Middleham Church were concerned, would now certainly be regarded as belonging to a past and well-nigh forgotten age. The truth was that everything here was old. The vicar was old, and so too were the clerk and the sexton and the two churchwardens, and there being no one to awaken these from their lethargy by the disagreeable process of stirring them up, they and the weekly congregation continued the even tenor of their way untouched as yet by the spirit of revival that was already beginning to operate elsewhere.

Those who assembled here on Sundays were

the farmers of the parish and their families, their labourers, and such an assortment of men of divers callings as may be found in most rural districts. They were not all regular church-goers ; but they were all equally proud, and indeed fond, of their church. The spirit of the class to which they belonged shows itself in many ways, and perhaps in few directions more so than in an implicit faith in an overruling Providence.

Thus the church, to the people of this parish, and especially to the old folk, was the house of God in no fictitious sense, and told them many things. It was the place where they and theirs had been christened ; where many among them had been married ; and it was the one to which they themselves would one day certainly be carried, to lie beneath the grass around the old walls and to rest there with others, their forbears, till “the last day did come.”

There was nothing perhaps of warmth in their religious sense. The expression of their faith remained inarticulate. But to have made any comment here on their parish church, or the services as then conducted, would have

been certainly to wound, and in not a few cases to call forth both warmth and expression of a kind to surprise strangers who knew these people not. Protestant they were to the backbone, and from that nothing would ever shift them. There were, of course, indifferent and ignorant folk among them: but the rest, where the church was concerned, were reverent and religious, with that reverence and religion that is content to leave affairs in the hands of the Almighty, and that otherwise seeks only to be left alone—untroubled by innovations, unpuzzled by excess of ritual and dogma, untouched by proceedings that savoured of a new age, and which, to the minds of those who considered that their knowledge in such matters went beyond the rest, spoke of another Church than that of England. Gray's immortal *Elegy*, indeed, aptly described Middleham's inhabitants at this period, no less than their desires in these and other directions:

“ Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife,
Their sober wishes never learnt to stray ;
Along the cool, sequestered vale of life,
They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.”

The parson read the services on Sunday mornings and Sunday afternoons, and similarly on Ash Wednesdays and Good Fridays twice, when the farmers gave their men a half day off, on condition that they attended the same. The aged sexton, Nathaniel Creed, dug his graves and tolled the bell when called upon so to do, and afterwards helped to set up the square-topped stone :

“With uncouth rhyme and shapeless sculpture deck’d.”

The equally aged clerk, Samuel Lowe, followed in his vicar’s steps as a good clerk should, and played no inconspicuous part in the services according to immemorial custom and tradition.

And since it is with the last two that we have more particularly here to deal, it is well to look at them somewhat closer. The duties of a sexton need little comment; but in the days here spoken of, those of a clerk were undoubtedly of some importance. Not only did he take a prominent place at baptisms, weddings, and funerals, but he was constantly before the congregation in other ways. It was, for instance, his duty—vestries being then

unknown—to lay the parson's surplice ready on the reading desk, and to put it round his shoulders when he arrived there from his vicarage duly clad in bands and gown; to take it from him when the Psalm was sung before the sermon; and to put it on him yet again, together with the broad black scarf that did duty for a stole, when the sermon had been brought to a close.

Then again, he habitually occupied the lower deck of the comfortably-furnished three-decker throughout the services, whether the parson—or “maister,” as Samuel styled him here—was reading the prayers from the deck above, or had gone aloft to deliver a sermon that was never suffered to be less than of half an hour's duration, whether there was much to be said upon the chosen text or not. From this same point of vantage, too, all notices were given out by him and not by the parson; and it was he, when the time arrived to sing a psalm as paraphrased by Tate and Brady, who announced the number and specified the verses to be dealt with by the instrumentalists and singers in the gallery at the west end. On

occasions when a collection was taken (and these were limited in Middleham to the four Sundays when there was a Celebration and to that known as Queen's Letter Day), it was once more the clerk's duty to take round the basin or wooden-money box used for the purpose, and to safeguard the same till handed over at the departure of the congregation.

Needless to say that all these and many other duties were punctiliosely performed by Samuel Lowe. He was already at this date a man of nearly sixty, and to those who watched him in those far-off days he often recalled the portrait Crabbe has left of Jachin. He, too, was like his vicar in appearance: he was of the same age, "of tall and slender frame," and "slow of speech," and he was also

"The gravest man on ground,
And heard his master's jokes with look profound."

Then again, Samuel, like Jachin, had acquired a "trick of state" in the discharge of his duties, and had also learnt to move "with formal air and gait"; and he was certainly like him once more in holding, before all else, that in the

majority of human affairs, the Devil would sooner or later be found to have his place :

“That never evil deed on earth was done
But of the acting parties he was one.”

If anything went wrong in church or parish, Samuel Lowe was left in no manner of doubt as to the door at which that wrong should be laid. He would cast his eyes on the ground, with one hand raised to his chin, and his head slightly on one side—perhaps leaning on a bissum with which he was engaged in tidying up the vicarage garden—and then after mature thought, he would look up and remark, gently, “Ah ; I knows.”

Sometimes, if drawn into talk on the question by those who knew him, he would certainly repeat the timeworn story that was the only one he ever suffered himself to tell, and which in his wording ran thus : “It wer’ a sad pity—a sad pity indeed, it wer’—as Zin wer’ ever given a zeat in that ther’ ark, along o’ the animals two and two.” And then he would add, slowly and with emphasis : “But it’s my belief that if so be as Noah and the rest on ‘em—sons and that as was along—had put un

over the zide, then the Devil 'ould a-been there all the same, ready to learn un to swim." He never laughed : to his mind the arrangements at the time of the Deluge had been certainly faulty in this particular ; and if they were so, there was no room for so much as a smile on his part, whatever his listener might either say or think.

Possibly Samuel Lowe was fond of funerals. Of course, as has been said, he was equally in evidence on other occasions, such as at baptisms after afternoon service ; at weddings in the early part of week-day mornings ; and at churchings, then held on Sundays in the middle of the service just before the general thanksgiving, and when he never failed to look up from the lower deck and remind the parson with a nod not to omit the wording of the special clause. Apart, however, from such occasions as these, it was certainly at funerals that Samuel was more than usually prominent.

In those days it was the custom at Middleham to hold funerals on Sundays, the parson going to meet the procession before the afternoon service began, and the body being

brought into the church and placed at the west end under the gallery. Samuel of course saw to it that the special psalms were duly used in place of those appointed for the day, and also that a suitable Tate and Brady was selected for the occasion. And when at last the time came, and the afternoon service was ended, it was he who led the rest of the congregation to the graveside; showed the members of the same where they were to stand; and otherwise kept order both by voice and gesture.

In his opinion, and perhaps rightly, the body of the deceased occupied the first place, and indeed retained something of individuality till such time as Nathaniel Creed, the sexton, had fulfilled his part and had gone up to tell out the years on the bell; and it was on this account, doubtless, that on one occasion, when a hitch had occurred in the proceedings, he advanced to the vicar, and was heard to remark, with pull of forelock, "Beggin' pardon, Maister; but corpse's brother 'ould like a word with you."

He was usually asked to the collation that

followed—that is, to the houses of those who were better off—and it was averred by some who said they knew, that on these occasions he never failed to remark that “for his part he had had three wives in his time, though thank the Lord he had buried them all with cold roast.” And as throwing further light on these momentous funeral feasts of his, Sarah Tombs, widow, who as an inveterate late comer at church had reasons for propitiating Samuel Lowe, had once been known to add: “Ay, Mr. Lowe, and that’s truth, it is; and I can also minds as you had them small cakes laid round the table, like, on black-edged note.” It was obvious, when such details as these were given, that Samuel’s presence lent a certain dignity to the proceedings.

But while doings of the kind differed little from those in other country parishes of the neighbourhood, there was certainly nothing either in Middleham Church itself or the conduct of the services that would have led anyone to regard this church as the church of the rich. For one thing, there were no rich to come; and there was no precedence

in coming out or going in. There was no Squire's pew here, with stove therein, and the only relic of the past connected with the rich was a hatchment on the north wall showing many quarterings, with imitation tears still visible on its broad black mounting, and with these words beneath, that this congregation above all might understand :

*Stirpis Suae Novissimus.*¹

Thus the whole atmosphere might have been described as homely ; and as evidence of this it may be recorded that on one occasion when Creed's son, Shadrack, corrected Samuel Lowe from the gallery in an announcement as to the hour of service on that particular afternoon—and which, by the way, caused relations between sexton and clerk to remain a little strained for a while—no one in the congregation so much as smiled. It was all accepted as perfectly natural ; and when Lowe, there and then, proved Shadrack wrong by intimating that the vicar had to go elsewhere, the matter was regarded much as a minor point might have been in a debating society.

¹ "He was the last of his race."

Of course all the pews in the church were high, narrow, and possessed of doors; and it was Lowe's province at Christmas time to go round with a gimlet and fix a sprig of holly in the door of each one. Such was the only form of decoration ever suffered here, and innovations in these and other directions were never for one moment entertained. Rules were rules, and inside the church rule and custom remained at Middleham unbroken.

Naturally, Lowe saw to that; while furthermore, there was one thing concerning which he was always on the watch. This had to do with late comers, and he never failed to warn these subsequently, should he have detected them in omitting to bow to "Maister" in acknowledgment of their error. So stern was he with Sarah Tombs one Sunday in this regard, that when she repeated her offence of being late on the very Sunday following, and sought to purge her sin by bowing to the vicar and then making the lowest curtsey to the congregation, Samuel declared to her afterwards with warmth: "There weren't no call to do that, nor nothin' like it: all as you've

got to move to, if you be late, be parson. Otherways it be sinful—and we all knows where such do come from."

It remains here only to refer to the music in this church. Hymns and hymnbooks were as yet unknown, as were also organs and harmoniums in the large majority of village churches. To lead the singers in the gallery at the west end were three villagers with instruments—a clarionet, a fiddle, and a bass viol. When Samuel had announced the number of the psalm to be sung, the bass viol gave out the note and repeated the same an octave below. The congregation then turned about and faced the gallery, taking little or no part in the singing, and leaving the men and boys above to do their best according to their lights. It was perhaps characteristic of the spirit that ruled in Middleham at this time regarding church matters, that when an accident befell the bass viol, of such a nature that a new one had to be procured, one and all subscribed their mites according to their means; the sole condition laid down by some, and much approved by the majority, being that under no circum-

stances was the new instrument ever to be taken inside a Nonconformist chapel.

While Middleham, and for that matter its two hamlets, thus continued the even tenor of their way, year by year, in matters ecclesiastical, few in the parish ever suffered their minds to be disturbed by the possibility of change. But rumours were now suddenly put afloat that a party of strangers had been seen more than once in the grounds of Uffham Manor. At first nobody paid much attention to the report. Visitors of the kind had often been seen there before during the past ten years ; but nothing had subsequently occurred, and Uffham accordingly went to sleep again. A distant relative of the family that had lived there long visited the old house from time to time ; but otherwise nothing disturbed the quiet of the place. A few gardeners made out their days in and about the gardens, and an agent and solicitor from the county town paid periodical visits and endeavoured to solve the riddle with the steward as to how the property was to be kept in proper repair with the insufficient means in hand. Other-

wise, the only footfall ever heard in the Manor House itself was when Esther Webb, the wife of the oldest of the gardeners, crossed the floors to unbar a shutter, or broke the silence ruling in the sleepy gardens by opening a window.

It was Creed's son, Shadrack—or Shakie as he was always called—who brought the news at last that turned the growing rumours into facts. He worked and lived at Uffham, being one of the Manor men, and therefore what he said might be accepted as the truth.

“The Manor House be sold,” he said to Lowe one Sunday afternoon, when church was coming out and a circle of the older members of the congregation lingered round the entrance door. “And that bain’t all, neither,” he continued, with all the pride of one possessed of exclusive information that he was prepared to dispense piecemeal as he thought fit. “The sayin’ is as all Uffham and all Long Green be to go with it.”

“Never!” exclaimed two or three at once.

“Ah; but ‘tis true—‘tis right enough, I tell ye.”

"I wishes as the old lot wus back again," said Lowe. "But there; it ain't a mossel o' use a-wishin' that where *he's* been about. It wer' Satan hisself as brought the grandfather to the ground; broke his son's heart, like, so as he died; and left the last o' the family beggar'd. 'Twer 'Zin as wer' the bottom o' the lot, I tell ye."

"Ah; I can minds 'em all," added Creed, the sexton, coming up to join the party. "My son a-told me a'ready; and from what I judges, it be all true; and what's more, as it be likely to bring about changes for the main on us. If Uffham and Long Green's to go along, as seems likely, Middleham 'll be left out in the cold afore many years are gone—you mark me."

Creed's words reduced the rest to silence. These old men here were unused to change, and were not given to accept strangers until they had proved their quality.

"The sayin' is," continued Shakie, offering another instalment, "the sayin' is as he's plenty o' money and knows how to spend it: I knows he's young, for I seen un."

"Money brings work," remarked someone from Long Green.

"Ah, and there'll be work, too, from what we hears over our way; and room for it wi' some of they housen, too," added Shakie. "They says as half the place be to be pulled down, and t'other half be to be built up; and as ther's to be mighty doings all over."

Shakie Creed's news proved quite correct, Uffham Manor was sold, and with it the whole of the two hamlets. Middleham, as before, remained church and college property; but the rest had passed to a new owner and a new line.

The stir occasioned when the facts became more widely known was such that even the oldest asserted it to be without a parallel in their experience. But this was as nothing to what was occasioned a little later when an army of men of all trades was set to work, and the sound of the trowel, the saw, and the hammer began to resound on all sides.

This new-comer—this young Squire, as he quickly came to be called—was obviously no fool; and what was more, did not apparently

care a fig for popularity. Many of the older folk resented being disturbed, declaring that "all as they wanted was to be let bide quiet." But an order had been issued that no cottage here was to possess less than three bedrooms, and that all were to have convenient outbuildings as well as piggeries; and since few possessed more than two of the former and also the scantiest of outbuildings, or none at all, there was plenty of field for improvement no less than material for the grumblers.

"Can't see for why us can't bide as us wus. My fayther and mother did live here, right enough, and there was eight on us besides. We didn't take no hurt, so far as us can see. Says it ain't decent, do he? Well, I knows nothing about *that*; but us wus allus reckoned decent folk, back along, in our time." Such were the opinions of many, though all were fain to admit that the new Squire didn't seem afraid of anyone when he had given an order; and that went a long way with these men.

Then again, while all this work was going on, it was generally remarked that this newcomer was doing nothing to his own dwelling,

outside or in. The Manor House, though he and a young wife had come to reside there, was left much as it was, nothing beyond immediate requirements being attended to. That also went a long way with these folk, busy as they all were taking stock.

“Don’t seem to care a lot about hisself, from what us can zee,” remarked Lowe’s son, John, to him, one evening on returning from work. “Seems a very decent man, er do.”

“So I should judge,” returned the old clerk. “Been brought up to the land, from what I can gather; and that do make a power o’ difference.”

The son agreed. Father and son were much of the same pattern, both in appearance and temperament, with that something approaching to melancholy that marks so many of this class. As the only issue of Samuel Lowe’s three marriages, son and father had hitherto lived alone together; but quite recently, John had taken to himself a wife, and was on the look-out for more permanent work than he had hitherto secured. Thus it was a stroke of luck for him when the new Squire took him on as one of the regular estate hands, more

especially as much was going on in many directions at Uffham, quite apart from the bricklayers, carpenters, and the rest.

A further order had been issued that all cottage gardens that fell short of a quarter of an acre in extent were to have their boundaries altered, and that in these, good, sound apple stocks were to be planted. An ample garden was as good as a rise in wages to a steady man, and also meant better food for his children. Then again, when these fruit-trees grew and fair seasons followed, the fruit should bring in sufficient to cover the best part of a rent that was never to be more than eighteenpence for those in regular employ; a shilling for those who could no longer do much; and half a crown a year for widows and the oldest folk. Those were what the people of these hamlets understood as being the opinions and final decision of this newcomer among them.

Of course the farmers, here and there, were a little upset when the new boundaries of cottage gardens encroached upon their pasture or some very favourite field; but on the whole,

and especially when it came to their turn for a visit from the army of workmen, they were well pleased that since their capital was limited, they were to reap advantage from the capital of another at an inappreciable increase in rent. "Things were looking up, and no mistake," they remarked quietly to each other at the ordinary, held at "The Top Boot" in the neighbouring town on Saturdays.

The young Squire was everywhere. He had from the first decided to go among the people of these hamlets that he might get to know them and they him—that he might study their way of life, their outlook, their wishes, and their hopes, no less than their curious little idiosyncrasies. If they were suspicious, he would gain their confidence; if they seemed to doubt him, he would prove to them that his word was as good and better than his bond; if they were silent in the face of his sympathy, he would try to show them that the sympathy of his whole heart was theirs, and that they could claim it irrespective of what it might cost him. He always offered them his hand: he wished to be their friend.

To some who watched him, peeping from their windows, it seemed curious that this man, possessed of so much, should apparently be content to work so hard and to do the things he did. They had never seen such ways before, and could not understand them; the older folk were puzzled and sat silent; the younger men and women looked at one another with a smile or a grin. The truth was, this new Squire was before his day, and his hand was that of the reformer who wished to learn while working also from experience.

He was always to be seen at the services at Middleham on Sunday mornings, and never seemed to care where he sat, often taking his place on a form at the bottom of the church. Sometimes his young wife was with him; sometimes he came alone. No weather stopped him. It was the same, the farm hands said, all over his estate: come bad weather in autumn or winter, there he was, out on the ploughing, ready to pass time of day with those he found; to take stock of the horses; to see for himself what was being done, and what life in the open was, day in

day out, for those working always on the land in the wind and the weather.

One Sunday he came again in the afternoon. It was the shortest day in the year, and there being no means of lighting churches at that time, beyond perhaps a candle in the pulpit when wanted, service was at half-past two. He had taken a line across country and through the woods, or he could scarcely have done it in the time. It was remarked afterwards that he had lingered behind at the conclusion of the service, and joining the vicar had gone to the vicarage, walking slowly while he talked.

That evening rumour had it that the vicar appeared to have something on his mind, while Samuel Lowe subsequently remarked that "Maister seemed as though a reg'lar change had come over un all the week."

The villagers had not long to wait for the truth. This time the farmers brought the news. It was all in the *County Herald*, that made its appearance every Saturday.

"New church at Uffham," ran the announcement, "with vicarage and full endowment, as well as schools." Then followed further

details, the notice closing with a long effusion about "the unparalleled munificence that brought at once honour to the county, conferred singular benefit upon the neighbourhood, and redounded to the lasting credit of the generous donor."

The following day the young Squire was in his usual place in church at Middleham, and it was particularly remarked by those who naturally cast their eyes his way, that he joined in the singing, when Samuel Lowe had given out in due form, "Let us sing to the praise and glory of God, the second part of the 119th Psalm"—

"How shall the young preserve their ways
From all pollution free?
By making still their course of life
With Thy commands agree."

Compared to all that had gone before at Uffham and Long Green during the past few years, this fresh departure was as nothing; and when the whole state of the case was grasped by those likely to be most affected, the inhabitants of Middleham and its hamlets may be said to have been fairly overcome.

"I told ye all as much, mind," remarked Creed, the aged sexton. "I told ye all how it 'ould be. Uffham and Long Green together measures a sight more nor Middleham do, and us of th' old parish be a-going to be cut out. You mark my words if the hamlets don't set up for theirselves, presently—with new church and new schools, and new burial-ground all set out ready, and—"

"—And new parson, new sexton, and new clerk," broke in another.

"Just so," continued Creed, with quavering voice, for he was old. "And see the changes as is in store for all on us here—mighty, ain't 'em?"

The whole country side was agog for the next few months, and there was no end to the talk concerning the possible fate of Middleham, especially. Then it came out—in fact, the Squire put it about himself—that Middleham would not be injured in any way: the tithe would all go to the mother parish. But from the day that the new church was consecrated, the hamlets would stand henceforward as an ecclesiastical parish of themselves, with the

certainty, however, of their being created a civil parish later.

It was nearly three years before all the work was done—the church completed, the vicarage and schools built, and the ground about them skilfully laid out and planted.

“It struck I all of a ‘oonderment,’ ” remarked Samuel Lowe, after his son had persuaded him to come and view what was going on, and there was the usual gathering outside the old church porch one Sunday. “Was ever such sights zeen? Well, well, to be sure. See the height of that ther’ roof, and of that ther’ steeple: why un can see ‘em now for miles and miles, they be that high!”

“It’s goin’ to be a high church altogether,” said Shakie Creed, with a laugh; “wonderful high it’s a-goin’ to be. There’s goin’ to be boys in surplices, I tell ye; and candles all over the church.”

“Boys in surplices, and candles? ” questioned the old clerk doubtfully. “I don’t seem to like the sound of them ther’ candles; ” and Samuel scratched his head.

“Why, that be nothin’, ” continued Shakie.

“Ther’s goin’ to be a girt orgin, and a man to play un, and another to blow un ; and the parson bain’t a-going to stand wher’ un’s allus stood—ther’ be going to be a pulpit for un in one place, and a readin’ desk for un in another, and a lection for un to read the Bible from ; and all the glass in the winders be to be coloured ; and the clerk be a-goin’ to be called by another name and sit by hisself ; and the sexton be to pass out the girt bell, and keep place tidy outside, and warm un up inside of a Sunday, and——”

“A-done, I tell ye: I don’t hold with none on it: there’s summut wrong !”

“Well,” returned Shakie, who was evidently much taken with the doings of the new Squire, “I wer’ only just a-givin’ ye an item of what was a-comin’.”

“And who be a-goin’ to be clerk and sexton —who be goin’ to take that, I should like to knows ?”

“Tain’t exactly settled yet, I understands,” said Shakie doubtfully.

Samuel and his son sat long talking that evening, the former repeating what he had

gathered from Shakie Creed, and John Lowe adding to it from what folk said at Uffham.

“It seems,” he said, “as the clerk be a-goin’ to have a house built for un, so as to be handy; and as his wife be to clean the church, and as he be to help the parson.”

“Well; I done that, years,” said Samuel. “’Tain’t much of a position as he’ll have over ther’, from what I gathers; and doubtful if ther’ be room for two—I do mean, a sexton and a clerk.”

“Ah; but he do say, as we’ve all on us been used to two over this way, and as he’d be sorry to take the bread out of anybody’s mouth.”

“Then he be a very decent man,” returned Samuel, bringing the talk for that occasion to an end.

The old clerk’s opinion of the new Squire was further strengthened some days later, when John came over one evening in a hurry, and burst out with: “He’ve offered I the place, father; new house and all. And ’er says as I shall then be followin’ the same callin’ as you does, and as it should go nicely for the missus as well.”

Samuel Lowe was standing in his garden, leaning on his stick and listening keenly while his son talked. He waited for a moment before replying, with quiet emphasis, "Well; such things do run in families, an' wi'out a doubt; but I don't hold with them candles and the rest, mind ye."

"Don't like too much of 'em, myself, I don't," replied the stolid John.

The sexton's place was filled the following week, by accident, and in this way. The men at work on the spire had gone home, and a group of villagers had strolled over, according to what had become a custom among them, to see how things were going on at the new church. It was a spring evening, and it was remarked that "the jackdaws were all of a charm in the belfry, already—inquirin' birds that 'em be." The finial had been placed in position that day, and when the vane and cross were fixed the spire would be finished.

It was two hundred feet to the top; and one of the onlookers had expressed a doubt about the ability of anyone present to climb the ladders and get to the summit. The

challenge had at once been accepted by a young man of the party, who had thrown waistcoat and jacket on the grass and was already half-way to the top. The rest stood watching him, making jokes, and saying that he looked no bigger than a fly. Up and up he went, stopping for a moment to get his breath and to laugh at those below. One more ladder and he was on the topmost stage of scaffolding, standing by the finial.

“It be a high church, this un, and no mistake,” he shouted, and his voice carried far at that height. “But I bain’t a-done yet: I be goin’ higher,” he added with a laugh. He took off his hat as he spoke, flung it into the air, and spat on his hands. Then he seemed to make a jump at the tallest scaffold pole near him, and proceeded to swarm to the top, while those below set up a cheer.

Meanwhile the hat, after many gyrations in the air, had fallen at the feet of an onlooker who had just arrived on the scene, and who picked it up and stood with it in his hand. “My eye and Betty Martin, take care—take care!” he shouted, as he saw the man jump

at the scaffold pole. "Whoever is that up there?" he asked.

"Why; it be Shakie, zir," replied several at once.

"Shakie!" returned the Squire—for it was he who had come up unnoticed—"it makes me shake to see him."

The others laughed. "He be right enough, zir—he be right enough. That ther' Shakie Creed can climb a'most anythin'."

"And do a'most anythin' as he be asked," added another.

Shakie was down on the ground ere long, tucking in his shirt and hitching his trowsers. He looked a little abashed at seeing the Squire with the hat he had flung from the top of the steeple in his hand. But he was put at his ease in a minute, when the latter gave it him and said, "You're the man for me, Creed; and if you'd like to be sexton here, when the time comes, the place is yours."

"Danged if him's not a good un," remarked one of the party later.

Thus the two offices were filled, and there was a new sexton and a new clerk. A new

vicar had been already appointed; the new church was shortly afterwards finished, and when the day of consecration came there were great doings and great feastings, and Uffham and Long Green were finally severed from the mother parish.

The new church was not thronged with worshippers at first, as may be supposed. With many, to attend church "was not their way," and a certain number here belonged to that class that enters a church twice in life and on both occasions when they have no voice in the matter. Many came at first to look round; the novelty attracted. Others held aloof, "not likin' the goings on," they said, "or such a lot o' music with it." The vicar was of course much canvassed, especially by the women.

"He be that high minded,"¹ remarked Martha Heaven, "as I couldn't understand a word of what er said in sermon, no more nor nothin'."

"Nor I, neither," returned her neighbour, Susan Mantel; "his prichin' ain't like old

¹ Of high mental level.

Mr. Smith's, ther', at Middleham, and I sat under he forty year when I wer' younger."

"The prichin' may be right or may be wrong—can't say nothin' at all about that; and the man do seem civil enough; but that there orgin do make such a dotherin' in my yud, as I be forced to sit down or come out. Don't hold much with orgins—well, for that matter, I never didn't."

In the case of the men, criticism took another line.

"Parson be right enough," said one, "if er don't go too fast; and it be warm and comfortable in ther', I can finds."

"And he be a wonderful good church man,¹ too, for I can hear un nicely," returned another who attended regularly, clad in smockfrock.

"I likes them seats a deal better," said another, "for we wus mortal scrooged in them at th' old church, wasn't us?"

John Lowe found himself greatly puzzled by it all, and told his father that, "come sometimes, he didn't know where he wus,

¹ A clergyman with a good voice.

he wer' that put to it." To which his father remarked that "it wus all deceitful."

The remark did not help him much; and between one and another John was more than once on the point of giving up the post. Possibly he would have done so, had not his wife stoutly protested.

"You'll come to it in time," she said. "It be difficult for the likes of we to understand at first."

Shakie Creed, on the other hand, was jubilant, and threw himself into it all, pulling the great bell in the tower with a smile always on his face, and only repressing that smile when there came the first funeral.

John's hesitation and bewilderment acted as an incentive to Creed "to take por old John on"; and when, by degrees, little additions and alterations were made in conducting the service, Shakie drew John's attention to it, and expressed a wonder "where all these doings were to lead to," trying the while to keep a solemn face.

At first, only the choirboys appeared in surplices, the men of the choir taking their

places shortly before these entered with the vicar, and the organist began to play. The young Squire was always one of the number, with Giles Meret, the estate carpenter, who wore bone-rimmed spectacles and sang bass; Luke Hulle, a woodman, who was bass on the opposite side; Daniel Paggs, the village tailor, one of the tenors; and James Alder, a natural alto; together with the coachman from the stables and a footman from the house.

It was suggested after a while that if the men were clad the same as the boys more uniformity would be attained. At this, one member left the choir at once, not on account of definite objection to the scheme, but because he was sensitive to ridicule. The rest braced themselves for the ordeal, and when the Sunday came, and the organist played something in march time as the full choir entered from the vestry at Matins, the variety of expressions on the men's faces attracted the attention of the boys as well as many in the congregation.

The day that had been fixed for the event was that of the Harvest Festival, when it had

been also announced that "in future, Evensong would be at 6.30 instead of 3 o'clock as heretofore."

There were rumours in the parish that the choir was practising an anthem for the occasion, and that at the first of these evening services they would enter in procession by the south door. Nor was this all. The Litany would be chanted in the morning, and in future all the responses and the Amens would be sung. Then again, the Squire's lady was known to have been at work for a whole year upon a white altar-cloth, that was to be first used on this same festival, while the Manor gardeners had already had orders to make use of all the choicest flowers to decorate the church, and the farmers been invited to send samples of their crops and the fruits of their orchards for a similar purpose.

In the face of all this, Shakie Creed strongly advised John to go and talk matters over with his father; and John accordingly went, not a little perturbed in spirit. The music, the flowers on the altar, the constant beautifying of the interior of the building with colours and

gilding skilfully applied, the way in which the vicar spoke in a whisper when he chanced upon John in the church—all these things, while tending to mystify the clerk of Uffham still further, were as nothing to the new departures now announced.

Once again, it was the candles and the surplices that mainly upset John. The whole choir were now to be arrayed in the last, and candles were to be lit all over the church on every Sunday evening; each one being an offence to John, who had to light them and also to put them out when the congregation had departed.

“‘Tis up—up—up,” called Shadrack Creed, by way of a parting shot, when he saw John start. “Us ‘ll get a lot higher yet, though!”

John was growing more used to Shakie’s banter, and only now replied with, “We be too high a’ready.”

Arrived at Middleham, John once more laid the whole case before his father. Samuel Lowe was growing old, and it was often now with great difficulty that he carried out his duties as clerk of Middleham Church, Creed

the sexton having sometimes to occupy his place in the three-decker, and give out psalms and notices to the best of his ability.

Samuel was sitting in his doorway slumbering, when his son came up the path from the road. He had often explained to John the mysteries and superstitions surrounding candles in a church, and had duly apportioned the blame. But now that he heard of their extended use and all the rest, as conveyed to him by his son, he raised one hand and let it fall upon his knee, uttering in tremulous tones : "Then pace to their zouls, John—pace to their zouls."

"There's someun have unsettled you," remarked Lucy Lowe, when her husband returned that night, "and it's my belief that it's that Shadrack Creed be at the bottom of it all. He wants to be fetched a good dowse over the head, he do."

The appeal to his manhood fell on deaf ears in John's case. "Well, ye see, we be so high," he returned, with a sickly smile. John stood in some awe of his wife.

The day of the Harvest Festival came at

last, and all things were carried out as rumour had foretold, as well as a few more. For instance, when the vicar mounted the pulpit in the morning, it was remarked by some in conversation afterwards that, before beginning his sermon, he placed round his neck something white, richly embroidered at the ends. "We're all a-goin' straight to Rome," they added; "there's not a doubt about it—straight as ever wus!"

A large number of people attended the service in the evening of the Harvest Festival. Uffham Church was drawing the attention of many throughout the county, and of others far beyond its borders. "I understand they are singing all the Amens now; just think of that!" remarked one or two, discussing matters in a neighbouring county. "It should be stopped."

The church was crowded. The procession attracted considerable attention, also the surpliced choir, the hanging candelabra of chaste design, the brilliant lighting and decorations of the east end, the demeanour of the vicar. Some were struck by the general atmosphere

of reverence, that to them seemed strange. When the time arrived for the Anthem, the vicar announced it as being taken from the sixty-fifth Psalm : “ The valleys also shall stand so thick with corn, that they shall laugh and sing.”

The Squire was in the choir as usual, and each member did his best. When the organist began the introduction, softly, and with many a beautiful harmony, there was a hush of expectancy in the church. Then the singing burst forth, and the congregation rose to their feet. For certainly ten minutes the lofty roof re-echoed to the voices. Men and boys, supported now by the full power of the organ, excelled each other in their efforts that the body of which they were members might not suffer in repute. The congregation stood transfixed. There was no hitch or symptom of any breakdown ; and at length, with many an Amen, the work that had taken weeks in preparation was finally brought to a successful close.

Not a little flushed and heated, the choir sank to their knees and buried their faces in

their surplices ; a throb seemed to pass through the whole church ; and even the vicar's voice was thought to tremble when he began to intone the first Collect. There had been nothing like it in the annals of the district, and the *County Herald* referred to it subsequently with guarded praise.

“ My old missus wus arl of a bivver at the lips, when 'twus done,” remarked an ancient villager on getting outside. “ I likes that, though ; and I'll come along again for sure.”

The Harvest Festival, to which many had looked forward, was over ; but on the following morning there was found scrawled in chalk on the vicar's entrance door, “ No POPRY ” ; the words being repeated on the shutters of the village post-office. Some laughed ; others cried “ Shame ” ; the words being rapidly washed out, never to appear again. The large majority grew by degrees proud of their church, and attended regularly.

“ It be what the good Squire have given we, and us 'll stick by un ! ” said the older folk with some warmth ; and the rising generation said the same.

Even John, and others like him, became in course of time reconciled, for he was now getting on in years, as was also Shakie Creed. The fathers of both were dead; and the old Vicar of Middleham had not survived them long. Over there, at the church of the mother parish, many changes had come about. The spirit of revival was abroad, and had found its way to many places.

“Seems as if it wer’ gettin’ all new over ther’, like, and all a-growin’ old here,” said Shakie.

“Seems so,” returned John. “Looks as if they was a-going by us. I understands it be wonderful different to what it wus, anyhow. They tells me as the three-decker be gone, and the pews be gone, and as they’ve got the place lighted and warmed up, same as we, and a nice choir. . . .” John had grown quite voluble.

“And what would your father ‘a said?” asked Shakie.

Shakie’s remark spoilt it all, and John fell silent.

All that John had said was quite true.

What had been new was growing older, and with the new came innovations. But while this was certainly the case elsewhere, no change from the first had taken place in church matters at Uffham. There had never been anything of ritualism here. It might be prophesied that there never would be. Certain ideas and opinions are held very firmly by the people of the land, and these are never likely to be surrendered. When all things became, in a way, new at Uffham and the church was built, a certain standard had been adopted that was in advance of its day. That standard had never been altered. Time passed, and what had made some stare and many talk, came by degrees to be regarded as nothing out of the way. A decade or so later, it was nothing more than what was to be found in many a country parish. A little later still, the standard originally adopted here was looked upon as old-fashioned in many another place. There had been little change, and none at all in ritual, at Uffham from the day the church was opened. Yet many continued staunchly to believe that if cope or chasuble, censer or cross, were re-

quired, these and many other things would be found in plenty in Uffham's vestry. That this was so, was shown at one time thus.

A great gathering of choirs was to be held in the neighbouring cathedral, and at a meeting of the Chapter it was considered that a banner, if procurable, would tend to greater order in so large a procession as this would certainly be.

“Send over to Uffham, and borrow theirs. They are sure to have one there,” said a canon, with a shrug of the shoulders.

A messenger was duly despatched with a note from the dean; and when the answer was brought back, it contained this from the vicar:

“I am sorry I am quite unable to lend you a banner: we have never had one here. But I think possibly you would have no difficulty in obtaining what you require if you were to apply to the vicar of our mother parish—Middleham.”

The story got about in other places than Uffham village, and was the cause of some amusement.

Two men were standing talking together

by the tower door of Uffham Church. Both were grey-haired, and looked like men of over sixty. One had just come down from passing out the bell for old Giles Meret, the estate carpenter, who had sung in the choir for nearly thirty years ; the other had been fixing fresh candles in the chancel and cleaning brass work, and was carrying away his things in a large basket.

“ Heard about the banner ? ” asked the first, with a twinkle in his eye.

“ Ay ; I did hear summut about it , ” drawled the other.

“ Couldn’t meet their wishes, anyway , ” said the first speaker, breaking into a laugh.

“ No , ” returned the other again, with some solemnity. “ But then, don’t ye zee ? —we be so low . ”

VII

THE LAST OF THE MOLE-CATCHERS

IT would have been rude to laugh, and moreover the rudeness would not have escaped the notice of the other party, a doubtful, inquiring look probably making itself felt by way of reply. Yet it was almost impossible, even in those days, to look at old man Young's face and not smile. The name by which he went—"old man Young"—reflected perhaps something of the craft and mysteries of his calling and the way in which he worked, going about always on his own account and apparently as a privileged person ; but about his face there was no mystery at all : it was open in the truest sense, and it was also comical to look upon.

To describe him as he would certainly have appeared to a stranger might be to be judged as dealing in caricature ; yet an attempt must be made, and the irresistible smile accounted for

that rose so often to the faces of those who met him. It was not so much that he belonged to a type and followed a calling that is now well-nigh extinct ; he was a type himself, there being few like him at any time, even in those directions where he and the generality of men commonly resemble each other.

First of all, his face, though not large, was singularly round, and secondly he was by nature almost hairless. He possessed few eyebrows worthy the name ; and his eyes, that were small and of the palest grey, were scantily protected by lashes and very seldom seen to blink. The mouth was the chief feature of the face, being large and with a quaint twist to one side. His cheeks were round and of high colour, and when he laughed or chuckled, the muscles of the face moved little, nor did the mouth alter much in form.

The truth was he appeared stiff all over, so that some might have judged him cut from one solid block of hard and seasoned wood. Even his hands and fingers looked stiff latterly, though he never lost the wonderful deftness with them that was of paramount necessity in his calling.

There were, as has been said, few traces of hair upon his face, but he was not, even in old age, altogether bald, and if that which he possessed upon his head was exceedingly scanty, he wore it long—almost as ringlets—showing well over the large ears beneath the hat and retaining its colour, light brown, to the end of his days.

In height he was below the average, and while he might have been described as a spare man, he was wiry and strong, with arms somewhat long and legs a good deal bowed. His clothes, winter and summer, appeared much the same. Over a thick jacket and waistcoat he wore a much stained white or nondescript-coloured slop, from one of the pockets of which the end of a large red cotton handkerchief generally showed itself. At all times of the year he wore breeches and gaiters, the former being of cord and the latter of box cloth or black leather according to the weather. His hat was of soft felt, rather high and round in the crown, after the fashion of the time, and having the brim always turned down in front; and his boots were neither over thick

nor heavily nailed, for reasons that will presently appear. To complete his outfit, he often carried, when not actually engaged in business, a short stick of holly or perhaps of yew, that he had cut from the woods himself, and that had its crook much polished by long usage; when at work, his hands were full enough without anything of the kind.

He had once been married, but had had no family, and when Martha, the wife, died he lived on in the same comfortable house, with its thatched shed and outhouses at the back, and good garden and piece of orcharding in front, doing for himself with the help of a niece, and following his calling as mole-catcher pure and simple—though it is fair to add that he was at times not behindhand in the matter of rats, when some farmer had had his stalls “rutted up by they vermin,” or other damage had been done.

The trade and calling of mole-catcher ran in his blood, and just as his grandfather, uncle, and father had been each in turn known as “old man Young,” and been the mole-catchers of their day, so had he followed in their

steps as the accredited mole-catcher of the district, "and of all the country round, for miles on miles," as he would say, in his very high-pitched voice.

Of course he had a Christian name, like other folk, and this was Shelemiah. "It be a sight too long," he would remark; though few, save his intimates or those who had employed him for years, ventured to shorten it to 'Miah. Nor did he encourage such habits. It was not for a trapper, if only a mole-trapper, to be intimate with many: he occupied a definite position in the place, and was respected. His craft was his craft, and what he knew had been born in him, or had come down to him from his forbears, to be supplemented by what experience might teach him in the course of a long life.

Thus it was that when his father was no more, the title of "old man Young" had been granted him as of right and to differentiate him from other Youngs in the parish, with the addition of "the mole-catcher"—the definite article being never omitted—to differentiate him yet again from those who merely caught moles now

and then when they got troublesome, and who, Young declared, with a cast round of the eyes, "wus as innocent of knowledge as kittens; I knows 'em be!"

Moles, then, were as the breath of his body; by them and by their deaths he lived; and as he sometimes remarked to inquisitive strangers asking stupid questions, "Wull, I reckons as ther' be nothin' about they craturs as I for my part doesn't know. Never had a lot o' schoolin'; didn't hold with overmuch o' *that*. Can read, right enough, and does a little summin'; but that ther' writin' I finds terrible awk'ard. And as to the work; wull, I followed grandfa' about as a boy: took to it from the first, yer see, and in the end rized myself to this."

Calling and achievement were always in Young's eyes matters to be proud of; and so they were in the opinion of his neighbours, and for the following reason: he was the owner of the house he lived in, and of no less than two acres of land adjoining. That, in the eyes of the rest of the parish, counted for far more than the length of time he and his had been

connected with the craft, or even the large sums he was currently believed to earn in a week.

Of course he had not always been so placed. He was already past middle life when he had made the purchase of the house in which his family had lived so long; and it was only by slow degrees that he had improved the little property, by adding a place for a pony and trap, and outside shedding constructed of oak uprights and well-tarred elm boards on a brick foundation—by planting fresh apple stocks on an acre of the land and laying it down to grass, by setting a climbing rose or two against the walls of old red brick and black oak timbers, and adding flowers that took his fancy to those growing on either side of the path edged with box that led from the wicket to the door.

The house faced west; the thatch was nigh two feet thick that overhung the three windows of the upstair rooms and cast deep shadows; and often in the long summer evenings, when walls and thatch and wide chimney-breast took on all the reds and purples and gold that may be known, artists would come along and ask

permission to make a sketch of the picturesque, old-world dwelling. Probably Young himself would be sitting at the time on the low bench, fashioned of a thick slab of elm, with four short oak legs, that stood against the wall on the east side ; and in answer to the question, would look up from his work and reply with a laugh, “ Certain’ you may paint what you do please, only I hopes as you’ll be so good as to leave me out o’ yer picter.”

Young disliked publicity of any kind, and had always a certain shyness about him, induced probably from living and working much alone. He did not trouble about the affairs of others, and objected to their interfering with his. But he was always a good friend, and his neighbours averred that “ old man Young was never one to keep his eggs to hisself, he wern’t ; and often did kindnesses behind the door—well, they know’d he did.”

Summer was his slack season, and it was then that he turned out most of those clever traps of his, on the make and successful setting of which his home in the first instance had been built up, and his livelihood now undoubt-

edly depended. He had worked hard and been successful, and it was no wonder, therefore, that *Mr.* Young, as he was called to his face, was treated with respect by his neighbours, if he was equally spoken of behind his back as "old man Young, the mole-catcher, who had put by a sight o' money and made hisself a pretty home, and all out o' catchin' they woonts or molewarps, call 'em what you likes."¹

"For my part I do mostly call 'em moles," Young would remark, when asked. And should any passer-by admire the little house, and inquire who might live there of the rather odd-looking man in the lane close by, whose appearance raised a smile and who was carrying things more strange even than himself, they would get for answer: "Wull, 'tis mine, mum; yus, it be I as lives ther'."

Such a reply generally took both men and women aback, causing the smile to die out of the face, and leading to their covering their confusion by adding: "What a pretty house." To which Young would again reply, casting

¹ "Woont," or "hoont," is probably from the old Danish "wand." "Moldwarp" was the old name, and is derived from the Anglo-Saxon *molde* (mould) and *weorpan*, to throw up.

his eyes that way: "Yus; and I can assure ye I worked hard to get it all together. Walked a hundred miles a week for years, I did."

He often seemed to like to talk when trap-making—in summer time in the shade of the wall, or in his thatched shed and workshop when the land was in the grip of the frost. He did not give his knowledge away to strangers; that was only natural. Many were the hours, however, that a certain other spent in his company during many years; and having known this one from childhood—from the time when he was no more than forty himself—he would often open out to him freely, telling of the mysteries of his craft and of the ways and habits of moles, when they walked the fields together, followed the course of the sluggish stream in the lower meadows, threaded the rides of the woods, or watched the bank alongside some ditch to see what might be gathered there.

"Clip traps be all very well in meadows," he would say, "and I do most always keep a few on 'em in the shed, somewhere. They be usefu' at times and some places, as I says;

but how be ye goin' to carry about a lot o' such tack, and when each do weigh a pound and more—perhaps nearer two, if it should chance to be a double? No, no; to be of any good, and for anyone to travel fairly light, reckoning the distances as has to be gone, traps must be o' wood. And I'll tell ye this, that unless a man can make all his gear hisself, he can never make this job pay—never! His traps must be made at home and nowheres else; and he've got to learn to make 'em, as well as set 'em proper."

He was cutting up some staves of an old barrel with a fine saw, into pieces measuring four and a half inches by two and a half. The wood was hard oak and dark in colour; and these pieces were to make the tops of the traps, into which the other parts were to be fixed later on. At the four corners of each a neat round hole had to be drilled with a three-eighths' bit, and another in the centre. Into those at the corners would be bent two small hoops of hazel, half an inch wide, carefully bevelled and smooth, and with a deep groove cut round their inner sides.

The measurement, in the clear, of these little hoops had to be exactly an inch and three quarters—no more, no less—to fit a mole's body nicely; and inside the grooves would eventually be hidden a single strand of thinnest copper wire, the ends of which would be carried through the oak piece and looped to a length of strong twine above. Two and a half inches from where the wire was thus looped, the string terminated in a knot; and when the trap was set, this knot was run through the hole in the middle of the oak piece, and fixed there by the most important thing of all—a small oak peg, in the form of an inverted Y.

"Ah; they's the boys," remarked Young, looking at his work. "Got a thousand of 'em; perhaps more. There be them as thinks as the calling be to be picked up in a day; same as I daresay they thinks as moles don't see, nor hear, nor smell, nor think. I tell ye it'll take a lifetime to learn the ins and outs, and years to set a trap right. You got to come to it by study, as anyone might say.

"Now, look ye here. Grandfa' died in

'66 and wer' eighty years of age when he went. He wer' among 'em all his life ; but eyesight failed un, and he wer' done up then. Uncle followed he, who did fight at Waterloo and drawed five pounds a quarter ever arter for what he done ther', as I understands. Then come mi old father for a while, and now here be I ; and if that bain't over a cent'ry and a tidy bit to spare, what be ?

"It do all fit tight, don't it ?" he continued, handling one of his traps—"must be wedged in, must these hoops, when they've been bent right ; and then there 'em be for ever. Some on 'em been in use for years—carries grandfa's initials, see ; same as these new uns here 'll have SY burnt in 'em arter a bit—which is mine.

"Ah," he would often say in later times—"talk to me o' the callin' ! Been amongst 'em mi whole life, and I knows. Talk o' the callin' and the trappin' ! I tell ye a man have got to have his whole heart and soul in it if he's goin' to know how that's done. If you're a-goin' to do aught at it, you've got to start by learnin' all the moves and the ways o' the craturs theirselves—what they

does here, and what they does there, summer and winter, and all times. You've got to learn just exactly what he'll do. And if you don't know that and haven't learnt it, you'd better stop at home. The whole takes learnin', I tell ye. And as to the trap-settin'—ah, wull; if you've got to get your livin' by it, it'll force you then—it'll force you, no fear!"

The end of the month of March in a very forward spring: the green of soft turf, the first rose-red blush of apple blossom, the pale yellow of wild daffodils nodding their heads in the sun under the shelter of a tall hedge. The turf here is as level as a cricket field. It was grazed a while back by a dozen bullocks; folk maintaining that the grass of many of these orchards will fatten such—"ay, and for Christmas beef"—without the help of cake and other feeding stuffs. And all that is quite true. But now the place of the bullocks has been taken by a dozen ewes that have been late in lambing, and whose doubles and singles with their black heads may be

seen lying asleep where the sunspots play, while their mothers move slowly about as if on soft carpet, nibbling choice bits that suit them.

There is plenty of room here, though these apples are all large trees. The grey and moss-grown stems lean this way and that, and the branches, beautiful in form and colour, stretch far; but the alleys are wide, and this orchard is full fourteen acres in extent, with another adjoining not much smaller, and yet another beyond that. A deep, wet ditch, with a hedge on the far side consisting mostly of hazel, bounds this orchard to the north, and across it in one place has been thrown a slab of rough elm, cut when the stick was squared, to make connection with a step-stile giving access in that quarter.

A man in a white slop is coming over the farther field, with a basket in one hand, the arm resting across a short iron bar carried on the shoulder, and a small bill-hook in the other. He stops at the stile and sets his load on the ground. The air is quite still and the day is young, and he cranes forward over

the stile and watches without movement of any kind.

To look at him you would think he was never going to move again. His eyes appear to be fixed upon the ground; the rich turf, the blossom, and the nodding "daffers" have evidently no place in his mind. At other times he has a quick eye for beauty; and it is only necessary to look at his garden and the walls of his house, or go inside and note the nosegay on the table by the window, to realise the truth of this. His life may be spent among moles; but you have known this man long enough to learn that he is for ever watching Nature and marking her ways at all seasons of the year, and that he can tell you a score of things that you yourself may have passed a score of times, without so much as a thought or look of faintest interest.

Suddenly he holds up his hand to you as you come across the turf towards him, signalling you to stop. Then, as suddenly, he is over the stile in a trice, moving rapidly but as quietly as a cat. He skirts the ditch

edge with a long stride or two ; then he seems to make a spring : down goes one foot hard upon the ground, and at the same time he holds up a finger in the air to tell you that you may come along now.

Before you have reached him, he has followed a short length of a mole-run with a stick, and a dead mole lies upon the turf.

“Saves a trap, when you can get 'em like that,” he remarks with a chuckle, that comical mouth of his twisted slightly up on one side. “Ah ; saves a trap, and that means time.” He picks up the mole, takes a look at the numberless molehills extending down the side of the ditch and far out on the soft turf, and turns again towards the stile.

“Working smartish about here, bain’t ‘em ? And now’s the time to catch ‘em, I tell ye. Catch ‘em easier in March than any time. They gets most active, last month and this. ‘Tis the ruttin’ season, and they’ll be having their young in May and back part of April. Just such a place as that there bank they’ll be after having their nesties in, though I’ve know ‘em bed out in the fields at times. Nests

be made o' leaves and grass and things o' that kind ; and the young uns may number three to five ; seldom six ; mostly four—four's about their number, you may reckon."

He is resting on the stile, with his eyes again fixed on the mole tumps : he has come nigh three miles to reach this place.

"Ah ; easy killed, when once you've got 'em : tap on the nose does it in a minute, same as a badger. Got no eyes, has he ?" he asks, holding the soft, plump, cylindrical little body in his hand, "Nor ears ? Blind and deaf, bain't he ?

"Now just you please to look here, and minds what I do tell ye. He knows light from dark, right enough, and there be his eyes, look—bright as two little black beads, and set straight back from the corner of the mouth. And as to ears—well, he haven't got none outside as you can see ; but look here, inside the fur here. That's where he do hear. And can't he hear, just ! I tell ye their hearin' be wonderfu'—wonderfu' quick it be. If you watches and sees ground movin' as I did now just, you must go up behind him—always

behind him—and quietly, mind ye, for if he hears a sound of ye, he be gone! Must be very quick, or you won't have him; must nip along on 'em at such times, and as I says, to take one that way saves a power of trouble. But I must be gettin' along and set this lot here," he concludes, taking up his bill and making his way down the hedge to cut the sticks he wants from "the nuts," as he always calls them.

These sticks have to be of two sizes—some of them about fifteen inches in length, and some about two feet, all alike being supple and with a good spring in them, especially the longer ones, that are stouter than the others. Having got these and a number of short, forked sticks for pegging down, he lodges on the stile while he trims them to his liking.

"Traps?—ah, wull; I've got two dozen along in the basket, and that's the most I ever takes. And wer' you got to cut your sticks and set and peg down, anyone's got to be smartish busy to set two dozen in a day, I can tell ye."

He was scanning the ditch edge again, and

looking from this to the molehills farther out in the grass. "They do always make their homes by a ditch or bank, and works out from that, as I've often told ye. And that's where you've got to catch 'em—in the main run, see?"

Conversation ceased after that: he was going to be busy. You had often watched him before; but it was all so clever and so deftly done that you must see it all again. You might not have another opportunity for long.

Picking up his gear and crossing the plank, he stops at a point where the turf has been slightly raised and a run can be traced leading to the first molehill, twisting this way and that in its course. He does not want his bar here, for the ground is soft, and he leaves that stuck upright by the bank, with the bill-hook beside it. Then he stoops, and judging by his eye, cuts out a portion of the run that shall exactly fit his trap. Having adjusted the peg in the centre, sufficiently firmly to keep the knotted end of the string in place, he fixes the trap in the run so that the hoops at either end meet the mole's path to a nicety. Satisfied with this, he takes one of the lighter sticks that he calls

cross bits, pushes the end in the ground on one side of the trap, and bends it carefully across to the other, where it is pinned down by one of the short forks, to hold the trap in place. The butt end of one of the stouter sticks is then thrust firmly in the ground on the other side, after which it is also bent over towards the trap, where it is held in position by the loop in the end of the string. The string is thus strained taut, while the wire remains loose. Some earth and grass are spread carefully over the top of the trap after that, to exclude any possibility of light entering the run, and the job is done.

When the mole comes along, the hoops being smooth and of the exact size of the run and of his body, he is not aware of their presence ; but directly he touches the peg between them—and no matter which way he may be travelling—the knotted end flies out, the stick above draws the wires taut with a jerk, and the mole is caught in a trice.

“Ah,” remarked Young, “they takes some settin’. The peg have got to be right, o’ course ; the cross bit firm ; and the main stick must have a strong enough spring back in him

to jerk the wires, tight as ever they'll draw. It's just there lies the craft. Taken me over a quarter of an hour, have it? You please to take one yourself and go and try. I'll give ye a hour, and I'll wager as ye won't 'a done it then—not to ketch, yer won't—nor yet in two," and 'Miah's face looked more comical than ever as he made the offer.

By midday half the traps were down, and a rest was taken for a bit of bread and meat. Young was always one of the most abstemious of men, and would tell you that he ate meat but once a day, with a bowl of porridge and milk for breakfast, and another on going to bed. "And as to drink," he would add, "never has no spirits in house; and never takes none outside. In times past, I did take a drop now and again, or a pint o' bitter, when anyone persuaded ye to it, and mostly wished I hadn't had it afterwards. Wull; one day I reckons what that comes to in a twelvemonth; I jacked it then!"

A blackbird flew from the hedge into a neighbouring apple tree and began to sing. You could see his black feathers and his orange

bill among the crimson buds and the emerald leaves. A little beyond the lambs had grown tired of sleeping and were having the finest games with one another, not forgetting to punish their mothers now and then.

Young's eyes were fixed on the blackbird. "Sing, don't he? He'll have to look out for hisself though soon, won't he? Cuckoo's mate 'a come along at my place a'ready, and heard the chiffer-chaff last week. They'll all be a-comin' in directly. 'Tis all a matter o' food wi' em—and a job to get it for some."

Young was cutting a piece of white bread and fitting a bit of meat to it. "Food? Ah," he continued, "them yonder's the boys for that. Never wer' such hungry things in all creation as be they. And feeds at as reg'lar times as do they as has their dinner bells rung to remind 'em. Three times a day they be at it to a minute, as you might say—7 to 8, 10 to 11, 3 to 4. Their appetites be wonderful. And bain't 'em determined, neither. Whatever they means to have, they'll have it. Can't find it; keeps on till 'em does. And if 'em can't get food to their liking—as it may be lobs, for that be

their staple, though 'em be wonderful fond o' the eggs o' the chaffers—if they can't get things of that natur', they'll take what's nearest; ay, even to one o' their own brothers or sisters. But whatever it be, it's got to be got frequent, or they be dead. They be things as works hard and wants plenty, and they means fillin' o' theirselves tight as drums, and fairly reg'lar too.

"Just listen to this here, now. I've tried 'em myself, times. Wull, one day I gets two alive, put 'em in a tub, and filled it three parts with earth. I kept 'em an hour or two with nothin'. Then I gives them a field mouse, and they swallowed him down. They weren't starvin', mind ye, but plump. And perhaps there be those as wouldn't believe it, but I seen it frequent; and one of these very two in the tub, as I'm a-tellin' you on, falls on t'other and part eats him when I wer' out. I tell ye their appetites be voracious, and they do seem, if you watches 'em, to be just like mad things arter food—ay, as though a frenzy, like, had took 'em."

The blackbird began a fresh song. Some-

one came through a gate at the other end of the orchard and set it open. Then he walked round the ewes and their lambs and turned them into the next field, slamming the gate after him as he disappeared.

“That’s it,” said Young ; “I asked un to do that. Now, this gear o’ mine won’t be meddled with. But there, it won’t be long afore the busy time be over. When the main o’ the birds a’ come in, my job’s about ended. ‘Tis busy time—Michaelmas to Whitsun : can’t get much on the ground arter that—growin’ time then, whatever ‘tis.”

He had finished his lunch, or dinner as he called it, and was getting ready to go on with his work.

“Must get the rest o’ these down,” he said ; “and that won’t finish the job for the day, neither. Trappin’ over at Snatchnall, and got a power o’ traps to look to ther’ afore I gets home. How many ’ll I get here, do ye say ? I’ll tell ye. Shall be round here again to look these up in a day or two, and out o’ the two dozen, ther ’ll be a score, I guarantee. Bound to have ‘em ; ther’s never no fear.”

If memory serves aright, the number caught was twenty-one, when old man Young visited this orchard three days afterwards.

It was time to be going, leaving Young to follow his work alone.

"So you be goin' soon for good, be yer?" he inquired. "S'pose it's always foughtin' out ther', along o' they blacks, bain't it? Oh; not always? Across the seas, bain't it? Never seed the seas myself; but knows what 'em be like, for all that. Wish as I wer' going along with ye—yus, that I do. But ye must come back safe, you minds; and the best o' health to yer; ther', I do wish as I wer' coming along!"

The two had not parted many minutes before Young was in pursuit of the one who had just left him. He came up breathless, wiping his face with his red handkerchief.

"I forgot to tell ye," he said, with a queer twist of the mouth, "I forgot to tell ye as I'll put by fifty o' the very best against ye comes back: they'll make a waistcoat for ye 'gainst the winter—or a cap, if you do minds."

He did not stay to be thanked. "My traps,"

he exclaimed—"the day's a-gettin' on, and I haven't a-done yet." Then he had gone, as quickly as he came.

Fifty skins? What did that mean to him? He was getting twopence apiece for every one he caught, two shillings a dozen, according to his reckoning; and that was what he had had all his life when working piece-work. In his early days it was all such; but after a while, much of what he did was done by contract, the price being three halfpence to twopence an acre, or so much for a whole farm—say, a pound to twenty-five shillings for one of two hundred acres, though, as he always averred, he often found he "could not do with it at that in most places."

He did not always, or indeed often, sell his skins. Skinning and the rest took time, and when, by degrees, he grew busier, he did not attempt it, and finally gave it up altogether. But for his best skins, when he had any, partly cured with a little alum or arsenic and not damaged by the trap, he generally managed to get a further twopence apiece. Thus his offer was no cheap one; and his words rang long in

the ears, with his—"You come back safe, minds—you come back safe; I do wish as I wer' goin' along."¹

Eight years had gone by ere the two met again, and many things had changed in the time, Young among the rest.

A stretch of dusty road, straight as it could be laid down when roads worthy the name first came into existence hereabouts; with no hedge on either side, and only separated from an apparently measureless extent of arable land by a narrow strip of grass and an equally narrow ditch that sometimes held a foot of water in winter but was now dry.

There were no hedges proper on any of this land, and no trees save in the immediate vicinity of the scattered farmsteads that were

¹ Two of the leading London furriers inform the writer that Dutch moles are now considered the best, having a bluer shade and softer fur; but that English moleskins are also much used. These last are chiefly procured from Norfolk, Herefordshire, and Kent: many also coming from the Lowlands of Scotland. They are sold by the hundred. Until recently the price has been from 28/- to 34/- a hundred, but owing to the large demand for them in Paris and America, this has latterly been doubled, the best-dressed skins costing a further 7/6 a hundred.

easily visible, lying at varying distances one from the other, with their rows of new ricks, outbuildings, and the cottage or two attached to each. Far away, a line of hills showed in pale blue: the sky above was the sky of September, with mass upon mass of great cumulus cloud piled there and hanging motionless in the still, clear air and the sunlight. A flock of plovers rose from the stubbles near by, uttered their sad notes, and flapped away, showing their white sides and then their dark green wings, till they were lost to sight in the distance.

A cloud of dust rose from the road in that direction and floated slowly over the dry land. Someone was evidently coming that way; and presently a small, common-looking, two-wheel trap, drawn by a pony to match, made itself visible. It took some time to traverse the stretch of road; but at length it came nearer. The man seen to be driving it was leaning forward with his elbows on his knees as he held the reins, being clad in a nondescript-coloured slop, and with an old felt hat on his head, the brim of which was turned down over his eyes. There were no two men in the land quite like that.

"Then 'tis you!" he exclaimed, pulling up. "I made sure as 'twas. And ye've got safe back and all; across the seas and that. I hear'd as you wus a-comin. And yer done with the foughdin', too. Wull, wull, to be sure!"

He was out of his trap, and the two stood talking on the dusty road. He looked older; his neck had grown thinner, was more scarred with lines, and had taken on a deep copper colour after a hot summer. But there was little alteration in the face; the sight of which raised a smile as it had always done, in spite of a certain change now about the mouth.

"Gone up in the world, you call it? 'Twus like this. Found myself going downhill when I got the wrong side o' fifty; been a-doin' a hundred miles a week on mi feet for years, ye see. Fust, I did try a donkey; but that wur too slow—a lot. So it had to be a pony: not an old un, mind, but a good un—a good un, you knows. 'Tain't a bad un to look at, though, be he? Good stamp, bain't he?"

The pony was a forester, brown and with a ragged mane; the cart had once been

painted dark blue all over—that much could be seen through the dust that covered it. Inside there was the familiar basket with the traps, the bar, and the bill, with an assortment of hazel sticks of various lengths, for none were to be got just here.

“ Ah—been at it ever since ; but can’t do much with it now just ; be too dry ; must have wet for our work. But it’ll come ; it’ll come. I sees that by the ways of them lapwings as crossed the road a while ago.

“ So you be back,” he continued after a pause, with his mouth awry and his small eyes screwed up—“ and safe an’ sound. I thought on yer, times ; and wants to ask ye this, as it come into my mind. Wer’ it like Waterloo ? Not much ? Oh. A sight different clothes ? Ah ! Wull ; old uncle would always be a-tellin’ on us that when Bony come along they was all set out in squares, and as his men did come and charge up, like, and got swep’ away, for our hands as wus ther’ was steady. And I read on the paper as you wus all in squares, same as that ; and as they charged yer, same as Bony’s men done. And I says to mi niece,

Jessie, I says, 'Depend on it, it wur jus' Waterloo over again, and nothin' else,' I says. Ther', I wishes as I'd been along!"

Later on in the autumn the two were out together more than once. That October was a wet one in the early part of the month, and the ditches alongside this road, and that often marked the divisions between the farms, were full of water. But November came in dry, and before it closed many a hundred acres were sown to wheat. Prices still allowed a fair profit for the farmer, though they were falling rapidly each year. The 'seventies were drawing to a close, and some were growing increasingly anxious. Thus margins were more closely watched than they had been, and things of all kinds that were likely to injure growing crops received increased attention.

Of course old man Young's friends, the moles, by no means escaped, with the result that his services were more than ever in demand. "Got the whole range, now," he said—"ay, thousands o' acres. To make the job pay as it should, a man must have that or nothin'."

He was never in any doubt about the damage that moles were capable of doing, and he was wont to cast his eyes from one side to the other and grin when he heard folk assert that moles drained the ground and brought mould to the surface of pastures, for the harrows to deal with in the early spring and to do good.

“ The harm as they does to the corn is more than the good they ever does elsewhere, and I knows it. They’ll go thirty to forty yards and more in loose ground any time. And just you please to mark this—the corn ’ll always die where the moles a-been workin’ under—always. Same on grass seeds and that. Same in places where the ley be down and small seeds sown. The seed ’ll chit and dry ; the plant ’ll never grow. Same among the turnips, too. They raises the ground up under ’em—their noses helps ’em to do that ; and wer’ they been burrowin’, ther’ won’t be no turnips ther’—never ! I tell ye I’ve marked it a hundred, hundred times.”

“ And the wheat fields is just the place to catch ’em, too, especial’ wer’ ther’ be water,

such as in they ditches, and close at hand for 'em ; for water they will have ; and a'most as eager for it as food, they be. Wheat grounds 'll give you time, ye see, because ye can get on the land ther' from Michaelmas till April. I've ketched five to six dozen in one field then, times, and a score in one trap in the same place, set against a gatepost where he can't work round. You gets the run o' the ground, ye see ; and when you done one piece here, you moves on to the next : that's the best o' the wheat."

There was no doubt at this date that old man Young had made a great name for himself. Every farmer and most landlords knew him, and some even ventured to address him as 'Miah. The folk in the villages knew his dark blue trap by sight, and would point him out to strangers as "Mr. Young, the mole-catcher, from over Bartsy way : one as is doin' well, and no mistake ; got his own house, these years now, and all got out o' they traps as he makes for hisself to catch the woonts with."

For many a mile all over this country 'Miah

Young was thus known to all, and not alone because he was an expert at his trade, but also because, as some averred, "he wus free, and wouldn't be behind in helpin' a man as wus down: they knew'd that for truth." Even the children knew him, and would smile up at him when he passed in his little cart, always getting a smile, though of a queer sort, in return.

When winter came, his work was in the woods, where he judged there were often living as many as from two to three hundred moles in one covert. It seemed wonderful to some that when the ground was hard frozen over, these animals could keep alive and find sufficient food; but Young would take you to parts where the ground lay wet in the hollows, turning aside the covering of dead leaves there with his foot and pointing to the familiar workings of his friends beneath.

"They wants water, as I've told ye, every bit as much as food, and they gets it here from the land shoots. And they'll go right down for it, too—ay, three feet and more. See; it don't matter to 'em which way they

got to go in a run, they be fashioned for it. Look at this un's jacket—see? If it were set same as that o' other craturs, how would 'em run back so easy? It be set upright. It don't matter to they which way as they do go; their jackets won't drag. Same wi' their ears. How would 'em get on underground if they had ears on 'em, set outside, like, same as other craturs? No, I tell ye, they be reg'lar made for the job o' burrowin', same as a bird for flyin', or a fox for runnin', and they got hard labour all their lives, they have, and no ceasin'.

"And I'll tell ye another thing about they, since we be talkin'. They be reg'lar made for swimmin', same as they be for diggin'. They got muscles on their arms stronger even than any o' your'n, though their hands be the greater wonders. Just look here. Stop a minute." Young had got out his knife, bringing with it from his pocket spare string and a coil of wire almost as fine as thread. He severed one of the mole's arms, and then laid the hand open on the top of a gatepost.

"Look ye here," he said. "See the breadth

o' that hand. And why is it? Why, here it be, look. Ye see, he've got what might a'most be called another finger, for he've got a bone—the shape of a sickle it be—lodged along the inside to broaden it out, while the paw itself be set turned back. His nose 'll grout, for he've got an extra bone at the tip o' his snout; and if his fore paws digs, his hinders pushes. But it don't end ther', for with such hands on him, he can swim amazin'—wonderful fast; ay, faster nor a rat, a sight.

“And I'll tell ye what—you never throws one in a brook or river, as he goes across—never: always comes back. I've thrown in scores alive, for they likes the water; and I never know'd one as didn't return from where he'd come. Maybe as they know'd wer' they'd comed from, and couldn't see across; maybe they didn't; but however that be, come back they always does. Ah; anyone as do follow our trade have got to know such things. He be forced to know; and not alone what the cratur 'll do, but what he *can* do, the same.”

• • • • •

The door of the cottage stood wide open, and the sun was streaming in on the floor, no less than through the lattice of an open window that looked out the same way. Spring had come round again and had touched its zenith, for the hawthorn was in full flower and the grass in the meadows was long. The day was on the wane; all the birds were singing; and when one ceased close at hand, you could hear others farther off, and yet farther off still.

In the corner by the window, in a high-backed chair, sat old man Young, and by his side on a polished elm table lay a newspaper, and on it his spectacles.

He was always ready for a talk, for visitors were few. Most of those who had known him long had passed on, and he himself had grown to be something more than old man Young in name. He was no longer "the mole-catcher," and for more reasons than one. His sight had begun to fail, for one thing, and his hands showed very evident signs of gout; and while he had always appeared stiff, he looked stiffer than ever now, and suffered much from rheumatism. He still kept most of his hair—that

is, on his head—and this retained its colour and hung long, almost as ringlets over his ears. By his side, on the window sill, stood a tumbler filled with white lilac, the work of his niece, Jessie, who saw to him in all ways and knew well his love for flowers.

His voice still retained its high pitch, though it had grown thin now, and quavered when he spoke. But it would always lower a little in tone and grow stronger when he worked back in conversation to his old trade and calling. Even his small grey eyes showed bright then, and he never failed to speak with pride of his great catches here and there.

“ The most I ever ketched in one day wer’ sixty-two ; that wer’ the very best. All on Mr. Rackstraw’s farm. Took me from light till dark. Just afore Christmas, it wer’. Kep’ on as long as I could see. O’ course I ketched two to three dozen in the day, times over again, but that ther’ wer’ the very best I ever done.” And the old man chuckled at the thought.

“ I believes as moles travels,” he would say, again. “ Wull, I be sure as they does. They does it in February, March, April. They’ll

come out o' the woods, and you may find 'em in this field one day ; and the next they'll be in the next, a-travellin' on, like. They moves at daytimes, early ; don't do much o' nights in that line ; never knew'd 'em do it then."

But at this date he also often talked of other things, for he had come by very definite opinions owing to the changes he had witnessed on the land, and the things he had seen in the course of a life that now numbered more than threescore years and ten.

"What would 'a done my job up by now, if I hadn't a-given it up myself, would 'a been through the farmers and the rest not being no longer able to pay for it. I've known twenty go from just round here. Things have all gone back ; and it's my belief that until the land be cultivated again, ther' bain't no hope for us. And if it wer' to be taken in hand now it would be many a year afore it got back to what it wus. We wants land, to work it ourselves, and pay a fair rent : a man should pay a fair rent always. And, mark me, ther' be plenty as could afford a farm up to a hundred acres, as couldn't afford to tackle one o' two.

"We all has to live on the land in the end. We can't all on us live on trades; and if us tried to, we'd come back to land in the finish. Cultivate the land again: that's the remedy in my belief. And don't ye ever forget as the land breeds the healthiest men."

Then again he had his views about education. "The schools are at fault, go where you will," was the way he always put it. "Ther' be too many fiddly fads in 'em; that's what's doin' the mischief. Then there's another thing. There be too much doctorin', and too much patent physics. When I gets a cold, I boils myself a drop o' linseed, and keeps a-drinkin' that. Or I gets and boils a few onions, and takes 'em goin' to bed. Famous things they be. But ther', linseed 'll check a'most any cold."

The visits to the old man were many during that summer and autumn, and often on these occasions he would relate facts about moles that seem now worth recording.

For one thing, he said that he always looked upon them as the most silent of animals, and had never heard them utter a sound, night or day. Their sense of smell, too, was wonder-

fully developed. "Don't do to handle much else when you be goin' trappin', for they 'ould find of ye for certain," he would say. "They never goes by hearing when they be huntin' for food. They goes by scent. I be certain of it. See here: I've often watched 'em huntin' of an evening aboveground in the months o' July and August. They be arter the white slugs then. Wull, at such times, I've seen 'em run their heads out, wind a lob, and go for him. So they be bound to smell: stands to reason.

"The lobs themselves be not very different o' their part, for they do hear, though folks says as they don't. But I knows as they do; and I knows as it's true. When lob worms hears 'em, they'll run right out in front of 'em; and then the moles 'll run right out arter them in their turn, and fetch 'em in. Ah, they be clever craturs, be moles; wonderful clever, they be. And they be always healthy animals, too. Never know'd 'em die much o' anything, though they'll suffer terrible in dry weather; and die in heaps if it comes a drought in May. The young are runnin' then, and they'll suffer

most, and die off at any rate should ther' come a dry spring."

The end of January. A thaw had at length followed a long frost, and the snow that had been lying over the land had been cleared by a heavy fall of rain. Mud and slush were everywhere, and water might be heard running in every ditch. To complete the general discomfort for men and animals, the sun had never shown all day ; the sky was the colour of lead, and a keen north-east wind was blowing.

The cottage door was closed, and someone had put a hayband along the sill outside to keep out the draught. Inside, the little room was warm enough, and a bright fire of wood and coal was burning on the wide hearth, where old man Young sat in his high-backed chair, his hands upon his knees. It was no time for flowers, but Young's niece had filled a vase with a bunch of dried honesty, the shining seedpods of which glowed like gold, catching the light of the flames.

The old man looked up as the door opened.

“Come in, come in,” he said; “and I be glad to see ye—that I be! I sees as you got the waistcoat on. Keep ye warm, do it? You should ‘a had a cap made o’ them others; but there, I daresay such things be out o’ the fashion now.”

He rarely spoke of the moles latterly, or seemed to care to do so. That part of his life was closed, and his work done. What seemed to interest him most was the contrast of the present with the past; and after the manner of the aged, he was sure the past was without doubt far the better of the two. He had little faith in many of the changes that had even then begun to make themselves felt; and he never ceased to regret the way in which the land was going out of cultivation. “Somethin’ ‘ll have to be done—somethin’; and that’s sure—or ther’ll be ruin.”

For the rest, he often appeared to be looking ahead. Once, when Jessie had come in to make up the fire, and left the room again, he said, with a throw of the head, “It’ll be all hers, when I be gone, as you knows; that is, what’s left on it, for seems to myself as if

I'd hung on a sight longer than I thought I 'ould. And that have eated into the savin's smartish," he added, letting his voice fall.

"'Taint a-goin' to be so very long now," he said, on this particular day. "You knows, don't ye? Wull, you minds me a-tellin' on ye about 'em always coming back, always. Wull, I be goin' over, I tell ye—goin' over

The remark struck the other as strange, coming from such a quarter. Silence fell, and the eyes were fixed upon the darkening sky that presaged further heavy rain, or perhaps a fall of snow.

Young noticed it, and with a flash of his old humour, he broke in with quite another note.

"What be lookin' out o' the winder for? Be ye afraid ye'll catch it from the missus when ye get's home?"

Both laughed at the remark.

Beyond his usual leave-taking, "The best o' health to ye, and good-night," those were the last words that passed between the two.

The old man's niece came out to open the gate, as if she had something to say.

“I fear he’s breaking fast, isn’t he?”

“Ay,” she answered, “he’s breaking faster than many of you knows. It’s only his spirit as keeps him up and makes folks think different.”

“He has always had his share of that.”

“And more. His spirit be wonderful; he don’t complain.”

“Not he.”

“And he’ve worked hard, too, all his time; and there’s some as ’ll miss him when he’s gone.”

“And with him will go another of the old lot; and what is more—in these parts, if not in others—the last of his calling—the very last.”

“That’s truth,” came the answer with a quivering of the lips.

The next moment Jessie Young had turned her back; and as she went round the corner of the old house to enter by another door, the last of the light showed that she had her apron to her eyes.

In this old man Young the mole-catcher, then, there was something lovable.

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A few days later, the bell in the church-tower that all knew as "our Tom" was beating out the tale of the years; and someone counting, made it seventy-seven.

And a year or two after that, one of a class, known as "week-enders," had bought the old house and ground; had done it up, in vulgar parlance; and presently converted the shedding at the back into a motor-house, with a corrugated iron roof, left unpainted.

The spirit of the place was gone.

VIII

L U K E

THERE was no mistaking him, even at a distance ; and there was perhaps less of misjudging his character, when you had once had a talk with him.

Apart from having worked on the farm as a boy, and come back to work on it again as a full-grown man, Luke Hulle had done all the more important part of the hedging here for five and twenty years ; and as this farm measured nigh seven hundred acres and the fences looked well, it was fair to conclude that he knew something of the art he practised.

He was a tall man, with a broad and honest face, and his age was sixty-seven. His eyes were dark and he had heavy eyebrows, and the impression he gave a passer-by was that if he received an order, his carrying it out to the letter would be a dead sure thing. But

then he had served his time as a soldier, had fought through two campaigns, the one in India, the other in Egypt, and was proud of having done so, as the two medals and the star he always wore on Sundays plainly showed.

As a lad of eighteen he had wanted to see something of the world, and having enlisted in a marching regiment had seen it, with much advantage to himself. He had learnt what hardship really meant, as also the meaning of that word climate. He had felt what responsibility was on a still, dark night on service, when there seemed to be no danger near and the silence was so intense that he could hear the beetles moving in the thorns some yards away.

He was only a private soldier in those days, doing sentry-go on outpost duty, with others at a distance—right and left in the darkness—and an army sleeping in the rear. But he had seen the light of battle later in his comrades' eyes; had used the bayonet and the clubbed rifle; had heard men calling on their God to end their lives and put a period to their agony, while the blood ran and soaked into

the sand, and each had to wait his turn. He had taken his knocks, and doubtless given them, though of this he never spoke ; had seen and faced death in many forms, and witnessed what cholera might do in an hour or two. And having seen and learnt and done such things for a shilling a day, less stoppages, and a free ration, had returned to the country-side and the cottage under the hill, to follow, eventually his father's calling, to take his father's place when he was gone, to marry the girl of his heart, and respond to the call of the land.

Such had been a part of his round of life, and now for a little over thirty years he had worked on this seven-hundred acre farm, doing most of the hedging for the greater part of the time, taking a pride in his work, and earning a character for straightness from the farmer for whom he laboured, and the very definite respect of the rest of the farm hands. Character had come to the fore as always, if stature and carriage had also, as always, lent a hand : Luke Hulle was looked up to, and by some was not a little feared ; and is so still.

He has never had any doubt about the land,

and is always quite sure that "it'll all come right." But he has very definite doubts about some of the younger folk to be found there, and has but a poor opinion of "their goings on."

"There's plenty on 'em, these days, as gets bezzling¹ about and looks shy at all jobs." He was switching a tall whitethorn fence as he spoke, a short clay pipe in his mouth, the bowl of which was close beneath his nose. "They won't learn," he continued, after a slash or two with the long-handled brush-hook, "and, what's more, don't want to learn. Take such a job as this here. It's bad yearly switchin' as does the damage, and the not knowin' the form as a fence ought to take. They won't be told—not they! Thinks they knows it all. Why, bless the life on 'em, it do take from twelve to fifteen year to rear a thorn hedge strong enough to turn a bullock, or keep heavy stock where you wants 'em, and nigh as long for a man to get to the bottom of hedgin'—well, for that matter, there be allus summut to be learnt at it, and every time as you has the bill or the hook in yer hand."

¹ Squandering money on drink.

He had taken his pipe from his mouth during the last sentences, and was using it in his left hand to add emphasis to his remarks. Had a stranger been present he might have noticed, then, that the third and fourth fingers of that hand were missing. The sight never failed to recall the incident to the minds of those who had known him many years, or the way in which he set about combating the difficulties that naturally followed, the facts being worthy of mention here because they brought out the man's character and added materially to his reputation among those he worked with.

According to usual custom, the landlord of this estate supplied his tenants with timber in the rough for mending odds and ends, though hanging- and falling-posts for gates, and such like, were cut out in the timber yard and subsequently fixed by the estate carpenter and his man. A waggon had been sent from the farm on this particular day, to fetch some of all sorts, with two or three hands to help load up, Luke being one of the number.

When on such errands he had often helped with the new circular saw that the Squire had

erected, and was doing so on this occasion, a gatepost being squared out of a stout oak stick, and one or two pushing it forward on the trolley till it came in touch with the saw. Sawdust was flying and the air in the open shed was full of the finer dust ; the engine outside working at a steady throb ; the voice of the saw rising at times almost to a scream, then falling to something approaching a growl when it was brought to a stand altogether, with its teeth buried deep in the heart of the oak.

When this thirty-six inch saw was running, it was difficult to hear anything, the work being done mostly by signal of head or hand. The log had jammed in this case, and therefore had to be eased back a bit and then run forward anew. Luke had his hand on the butt end at the moment, and was pushing with all his weight to help the sawyer. “ Ease her ! ” cried the latter, seeing what was coming. It was too late : the hungry teeth of the saw ripped up through a bend in the stick, and in a flash the two fingers of Luke’s left hand were gone.

At such a sight, three or four men by the

bench turned and ran out into the lane, only, however, to be pursued by Luke's voice calling after them: "Where yer runnin' to, yer bally fools? Do you think as the saw's a-coming arter yer; or are yer afraid of a spot o' blood?" The very sight of these younger men behaving in such a way appeared to make Luke forget his injuries for the instant. He wrung the blood from his mangled hand, and then watched them in silence as they returned to the bench, looking sheepish.

"I don't want to miscall anyun, nor any o' you; but yer shouldn't do that," was all that he added; and then asked one of the number to "lend him a hand home."

He never appeared to feel the want of those fingers in later days. By persistent pluck he learnt how to make three do the work of five; and Nature, as usual, accommodated herself to circumstances and helped the man of grit. Part of his hedger's outfit consisted of a pair of hedge-trimming gloves made of sheep's hide, and when a fence was extra thick he often wore the left-hand one, if not always the right.

The rest of his kit did not amount to much —a hedge-slasher, as he called his long-handled brush-hook, a bill-hook for layering, and a short axe for chopping down big stumps or for cutting out stakes, which he explained “should allus be four foot long and made o’ ash, for such do lasties longer.” Then there was a maul, “which some do call driver, but which you minds you never calls mallet,” for driving these stakes, and lastly, the pair of gloves aforesaid.

“But, lor’ bless yer, it bain’t the tools, it be the knowledge as does it, though I be not one to tell you as a hedger can get far wi’out a good pair o’ these here,” he would remark, showing you his gloves with pride. “See how they be cut. Famous, ain’t it? Left hand un reaches up to shoulder when you straightens yer arm, look, and t’other stops at the elbow to give your right arm play. And I can tell you as a good pair o’ they do lay anyun in a smart few shillun, they do.”

He was always glad to talk about his work, in that deep voice of his, being sometimes

alone for as much as a week at a time. And it was always good to watch him. His arms were hard as steel, and to see him layering a fence was a sight not exactly to be missed by anyone interested in an art that is likely soon to be forgotten on most farms.

“Cut yer layers as near as ye can to the ground, and don’t you layer again arter that for so it be six to eight year,” he would say. Then with a powerful stroke with his tool, keen as a carpenter’s chisel, he would deal a blow at the butt of a stout hawthorn stem, of just sufficient force to sever it for bending over, exactly as far as he wanted, and rarely requiring to be repeated.

“But what’s the sense of layerin’ a fence, and leaving it same as some does? If you wants to give un a chance, you must give it protection; and I says as they wants protectin’ for three year arter—ay, and careful weedin’ too. Keep your young hedges clean o’ weeds, though you be called on to weed ‘em twice or thrice in the year. Thorn fencing, first and last, costs money, mind yer; and you be just a-goin’ the right way to throw

someun else's money away, unless the work be protected in the first onset and cared for, as I says, in the by and by."

Of the mysteries of switching, so as to leave the top shoots to grow ; of always doing your dressing with an upward stroke, to make the hedge wedge-shaped ; of never touching a young hedge, for trimming and dressing, till it had been planted from four to five years ; and of the judgment required in ribbing—of cutting the outgrowth, where it might be too proud, back to the main stem—all these things he was ready to explain to anyone who cared to listen. He was fond of the work and proud of what he could show, often remarking : "Wull, I be one o' they as be fond of a bit o' hedgin'—wonderfu' interestin' it be: wull, I did allus take to it, from the time I did follow the old hedgers about as a boy, and studied what mi father done.

"Ay; and I'll tell yer more—I car'd the hedger's tricks wi' me when I put on the red jacket; and when we was out on the sands, I warn't afeard o' they wait-a-bit thorns, and showed a few o' the old company how 'em

might be tackled to keep the fuzzies¹ out, if so be they thought to rush us of a night, up Nile way. Such things do come in usefu', times, and a man do never know wher' he meut be.

"But for all that, and whether it be drainin' at the first onset, plantin' or cleanin', or cuttin' back—like it or fancy it as you may—it do all want studying, and it have all got to be done wi' judgment. There's plenty thinks as it is to be knocked off anyhow in a day; but never you be in a hurry for one thing, and that be to run a hedge up too fast; it'll come, it'll come, wi' decent treatment, and do you a credit an' you wait.

"You're right; all's of a hurry, these days. And see the nonsense as some talks about such things. 'Tain't as they means to lie; but they minds me, when I listens to 'em—and that bain't often—o' they folk as comes home market peert² o' Saturdays, wi' a tidy drop o' cider in 'em.

"Ah; you set such as they, as thinks they knows—you set such as they to fill gaps in

¹ The nickname for the Arabs of the Sûdan.

² Cheerful.

a old hedge wi' livin' thorn, and then see wher' he'll be. I bain't a-goin' to tell you an untruth, and I can't go for to rightly say as I never made a mistake at such a job myself. But you may take my word for it, as of all the jobs in a hedger's callin' that be out and out the most tricky; and the work as some does in such directions 'll never dure, nor be worth a farden piece neither. Be all right for a day; but come along and look at un later and see whether the new stuff have taken holt or no. It be just the same wi' most things though, bain't it? There's plenty o' folks as comes along wi' their long talk and says they knows; but it be all a lot o' tales—all a lot o' tales, and nothin' else."

He had just finished a hedge that had wanted trimming for some time, and was raking up the rubbish of brambles preparatory to burning it. The more useful stuff he had faggoted, and the piles of these, neatly built up, stood at intervals along the fence ready for carting; the meadow here being for hay this season, and the sooner they were off the ground therefore the better.

"Be most done now for this year. Hedgin' proper do end in February, if trimmin' do go on to March and now just—a man's no right to do it arter that. They'll be a-drawing o' these here faggots, come Monday, and then it'll be time to close the gates till hay cuttin'. They faggots don't look amiss, though, do 'em? Ah; the work be right enough, but there ain't the money in it as there be in hedgin'.

"Now I'll tell yer. It be a rummish job to earn more nor two-and-six a day faggotin', and, for the matter o' that, better money be very seldom to be won at it. My meanin' be, as a man can't afford to do much gossipin' when he've got such a job as that agate.¹ When there's such stuff as we got here—yollum suckers, mawple, a bit o' ash and such like—you cuts and draws it out first, and when your hedging's done, you comes back to it for the faggotin'. A shillun a score's the price, five shillun th' hunderd. Fifty in the day be good work; so you can't, in usual, earn more than your half-crown, yer see—I knows as no man

¹ So engaged.

can, 'wever, and stack 'em and all as 'em should be.

"Days be for most part short when hedgin' and faggotin' be on; and there's plenty as forgets that. But if you talks o' earnings, hedgin', it be like this. If you was to ask me, for instant, what I'd do such a hedge as that un yonder for—and that bain't one o' ourn, mind yer, no fear!—I should tell you as I wanted seven-and-six the chain o' twenty-two yards to do it, though o' course I've took many a length myself at four shillun, and less, and gone wrong over 'em too.

"I bain't a-goin' to tell you as I haven't a-done a chain in a day in my time, and worked from seven to half arter five afore I got through wi' it, too. But come the next, maybe, I haven't a-done half a chain, nor nothin' like it. You've got to break the days in two to get at it, yer see, and if it do work out at four shillun, you be lucky. In the dead o' winter, days be short, and the earnings then be most in general three-and-six, and sometimes it be less. It ain't

a lot when you counts in the tearin' o' your clothes, be it?—not a lot, as you might say."

The month of March was drawing to an end and the elms were clothing themselves in pale green. Each day made a difference in the appearance of the country, and each week now would add to the number of the flowers in the hedges and the visitors from over the sea. The sun, too, was growing in strength daily, and where it beat in full warmth, white violets at the butts of these great trees declared their presence by their scent. Farther along, many tufts of primroses were making their appearance among the red and green leaves of the wild carrot, with the stitchwort, the lords and ladies, and the red dead-nettle.

A chiff-chaff—one of the very first to arrive—was uttering his note from the lower branch of one of the trees: higher up, a pair of blue tits were carrying out a busy search on the mightier limbs: higher up still, rooks were busy with their nests, and some were already laying: and higher yet again, the north-west wind was sweeping a dark

blue sky—white cloud-masses racing before it, their shadows producing endless contrasts on the vivid green wheat, the red of the fallows, and violet woods beyond. The land looked prosperous and gay. There was the promise of a good season, the frosts having done their work well, and the seed-time having been perfect for the farmer.

Luke had got his fire to burn, and the smoke was being caught by the wind and blown across the meadow and into the next field. His work as a hedger was over for the season, and ere long he would be turning his hand to other jobs. He had taken the trouble to learn, and could be trusted to do many things, from repairing a fence and setting up posts and rails for the protection of a new quick hedge, to building a wheatrick and thatching it if wanted, or trussing out a rick of hay. As a soldier he had had to fill many places, from navvying to being three parts a sailor, and now for thirty years on the land he had set himself to pick up all he could, and so to add to his weekly money by learning certain arts that others were already

beginning not to care to know. At trussing out a rick, or tying boltings of straw—twenty-four to the thrave—he always said he would not take a beating from anyone; and to watch him at the former made those who stood by wonder how he arrived at the proper weight of a truss. He always answered with a laugh, if asked, and generally in this fashion :

“ You asks if these trusses be fifty-six pounds each and forty to the ton? Wull—I reckons as 'em be. 'Tis like this; the Master came along one day, and says as he wanted 'em weighed very partic'lar—awk'd customer, s'pose. So I says to he, ' I don't understands your scales so well,' I says; ' but I understands mi own; and you please to come up when I've done and weigh any one as you likes, and I'll wager as there's not one as is two ounces out.' Nor wer' 'em. I knows a'most exactly when I've tried the first, and the size too. I judges arter that by scowl o' brow.”

He had arrived at his own way of doing things, partly, perhaps, because of his maimed hand, though he always admitted that his

father had taught him how to plant a hedge and to make it take proper form as it grew, or he would have never learnt to do the work as it should be.

"There's things as you've got to be told, and this here ain't to be picked up like thatchin' and faggotin'," he remarked, when finishing his work on this fence for the day. "It looks more as it should, now, don't it? Nicely dressed back, eh?"

He was running his eye down the line of great hedgerow elms, much as a soldier might down a line of men deployed. "It'll last now for six or eight year; and who'll come along and try their hand at it next time, God knows. 'T'ould be a pity, now, to let 'em all go back, though, 'ouldn't it? Or to let that ther' barbed wirin' come in, what's a disfigerment and a danger, too, to man an' beast.

"But ther', I oftentimes thinks the likes o' that: gettin' on, yer see, and pretty near put in my time towards final discharge. There be changes comin over the land, too, and I can't seem to get beyond 'em, somehow. The young uns won't have it: got above it, or

summut; and them as is older wants more wages—that's right enough, pervided they be worth the money when the pay-night comes: wants a lot o' other things, too, from what I gathers of their talk; but how it's all to be managed I couldn't justly say."

Luke Hulle is not the only man who talks in such a strain out here. The same words are to be heard in the mouths of many. Men like him still retain the traditions of the past, and are linked to them in memory. They have followed their fathers, heard their talk, and have learnt from them the finer arts of husbandry. A few among them can even recall their grandfathers' stories of the far-off days and what life on the land was then. And by such means they have inherited something of the spirit of the old folk and brought it down into the life of to-day; though if asked now about the morrow and the outlook that way, many among them shake their heads.

“I did oftens go out to work at four in the mornin', as a boy,” Luke Hulle remarked one day, when haymaking had begun and he was busy mowing, “and plenty o' times did not

leave stable till seven o' evenings. But we was happy, and didn't mind nothin'. There wasn't the pride in them days as is now; and us meant workin'. There was a sight more o' friendliness then as well—folks did seem more all alike, and not one above another; and us was content. But what be it now? Why now 'tis—if one o' the youngsters hasn't got three or four suits and three or four pairs o' boots, they bain't satisfied. And what's a-goin' to satisfy such as they?

“I tell yer as they looks upon comin' on the land as a punishment; and what's more, there be many o' the fathers o' the youngest on 'em do look on it in the same fashion. Why, here's my neighbour, Harry Clegg, a-talking of his varmint of a son, says to me this way: ‘Well, if he don't turn over a new leaf soon, he'll go straight on the farm, that's what he'll do—straight on the farm!’ ‘For why not?’ says I; ‘tain't no disgrace in it, be ther?’ Or look again at such sayin' as this. There's Bill Brooks a-talkin' of his son 'listin', and says: ‘None of our family hasn't come to that *yet*, and they bain't a-goin' to now—the very

idea!' I lets him have it a bit, arter that, and Harry Clegg the same; and now they knows my leanings.

"But, lor' bless yer, some o' the mothers ain't no better, and aids and abets such foolishness in 'em, if, for the matter of that, they ain't afear'd on 'em. You knows as well as me as a 'ooman can lead a man a'most where she do like. Can't a-been about the world a lot wi'out havin' seen summut o' that. Ay; seen scores led away and brought to ruin wi' it, I have. Wull, it be the same here. The lads about knows as no girl 'll look at 'em while they bides on a farm: don't lead to nothin', they says: do lead, 'wever, to nothin' but hard work, in a cottage stuck away alone, and no variety.

"And there's plenty comes along and tells 'em the same, and talks o' the callin' o' the land as the lowest o' the low. So the young folks forgets the old as you might say, and all as was in 'em; dresses theirselves up, gets off to the towns, and comes back wi' town manners and town gait; but the main of it be all sham, just as it be all pride at bottom."

Luke spoke with a ring of contempt in his voice. "You set any on 'em a job," he went on, after one or two pulls at his pipe—"you set 'em a job, and you'll be sure to find as the main on 'em as comes to farm work now be melch-hearted and soon darnted. They bain't out for all as can be picked up, in all manner o' ways and for the main part o' the year, but to molly for theirselves—that be all. But I can tell you—and you knows as there be hundreds done the same—as when I begun, I did work for nine shillun a week—ay, and since I been married.

"But that weren't my whole earnings; no fear! Such as that 'ouldn't 'a done. I reckoned the nine and ten shillun, and what it rose to, wer just wet and dry money, and to be added to by any industrious man. Why, take this job as I be at now; I don't mind a-tellin' of yer as I be taking a guinea a week at it. And what about the hedgin' and ditchin' in winter times, at so much the chain, accordin' to what it be? Or what about overtime and piecework at such jobs as cuttin' out and hoeing turnips, or the wheat and the beans and the barley,

come the spring months ; or the hay as we be at now ?

“ And then, look you again at when the corn harvest do begin. 'Tis true as the main be cut, these days, with the binder ; but it ain't every season as that can be worked, especial' when the weather's been rough and the crop has got laid and twisted. It ain't all over with sickle and the hook and the scythe yet awhile, for I've seed a farmer pay as high as fourteen and fifteen shillun an acre to get his wheat cut the best way as he could, and since them 'nation machines come in.

“ But who do yer think be a-goin' to cut it now ? Do you think many of them as comes out here as a last resort, as you might say, knows how to work a sickle and a hook, much less such a tool as this here ? I tell yer there's gettin' few now as can use a scythe, or knows the grass-nail from the pole-ring, or the nibs from the sneak,¹ just as there be gettin' few as can do hunderds o' other jobs as is wanted on every farm, don't matter where it be.

“ 'Tis like this—we farm hands be skilled

¹ Nibs are the handles, and the sneak (sometimes, snathe) is the curved pole to which the blade is fixed.

hands, though other folks doesn't seem to reckon as 'tis so. And it be just here as they as comes along finds as there be more to be learnt than 'em thought for. They don't like it neither; it be too rough for 'em, and by rights they've no business here at-all. But they wants the same higher wages, all the same, and wet or dry, as the sayin' is, and as though 'em knew'd all about it and was fit to do piecework and make their overtime.

“They says as livin's dearer. And so it be, some ways. And they says again as there bain't the piecework or variety as was to be had in times gone by. Wull, there's plenty o' tools gone out o' use in my time, and there be a sight more machinery and not the labour wanted as ther' was. And that's true again. But I says this—if a man do like to learn the things as a farmer can never do without, never, and leave the leaden socks at home as he've sometimes got in his shoes, there's as good money to be won on the land as anywhere, and a deal healthier life to be gotten at the same time.

“I know right enough, as with some as muddles on out here, though the fixed wage,

apart from earnings, be a quarter again as high as it wer' when I first come back, as they be worse off now than us was then. When mi father wer' livin' us had a tidy-sized garden and a good piggery, and a good house at eighteenpence. And us had two pigs : killed one, and he helped to pay the rent ; brought t'other in house, and rubbed the salt in un of evenings, famous ; and with that, and a bit earned harvestin' and piecework, us often did uncommons nicely.

"And I'll tell yer another thing—there weren't half the sickness them days as there be now. What us did eat wer' good : the bread wer' home made, every crust on it ; and the bacon home cured ; and so we knew'd what was in the lot, like, and what we was a-puttin' inside. We didn't want so much, neither ; nor look for so much, them days. Why, many's the time I've come home with a packet o' rush-lights and an ounce o' tea ; and that had to last a week"—and Luke laughed loudly at the thought ; "but we was happier then than some ever will let 'emselves be now, for us wer' content, and ther' weren't so much pride and gaddin' and the rest as ther' be these days.

" My grandfather ever talk of the hungry 'forties, you asks? Ah—times; and what's more, mi father done the same. And they did allus say this—'We did live and wer' merry, and so meut you be. Don't you be upstart: if you be offered a job, no matter what it be—take and do it.' Grandfather did only laugh, bless yer, when he spoke o' them times, and 'ould allus finish, same as this—'Us did live —what more did ye want?' They bain't like that now—leastways, not a lot bain't.

" Ah," he continued after a pause, "they old folk—God bless 'em! Kep' on at it all their time, they did; and you may take this as Bible truth, you may—work wer' bred in 'em, I tell yer, and wi' folks o' their metal, it wer' a great denial to 'em when they was forced to give over and felt as they was falterin'."¹

There was silence after that for a while. Luke whetted his scythe with the stone he carried at his back in a belt, and then went to work with a six-foot swing at the tall, rank grass close at hand. His job at the moment was to cut out the corners and awkward places where the machine could not reach, and in the

¹ Failing in health.

very same meadow in which he had done the hedging three months before. There was a crop here of two tons to the acre, if it could be got in well. The cocksfoot grew rank and high in the shade beneath the elms; but farther out in the meadow the sun shone on a myriad buttercups and clover heads, and the warm winds of June played with the finer grasses and drew the scents from the countless flowering plants that go to make rich herbage.

The wind, at the moment, was sending an endless succession of grey-green ripples coursing across the field, and when it reached the boundary hedge, it passed on over, to play in turn with the wheat not yet in ear, but which was going to return, later on, a yield such as no other land in the world could boast. A stretch of pink sanfoin lay beyond that, and then a field of oats and another of late-sown barley. From there, the land dipped towards the south, and arable met grass again in the form of orchards, where cider and perry fruit grew, where milch cows were grazing, and sheep lay asleep in the shade.

There was nothing wrong with this soil.

The very trees in the hedgerows proclaimed its richness, no less than the herbage in the meadows and the colour of the soil of the summer fallows. To look over it from this rising ground was to let the eye wander across a wide vale, rich and well watered ; where farming had reached a high standard, and where not so long ago there was much prosperity.

The growing crops under the hand of the June sun were full of promise : the sound of the grass-cutters, far and near, proclaimed that the hay harvest had begun : in a day or two the first ricks would be building in many a yard, filling the air with the scent of the new-mown hay : from now onwards, all hands would be busy, good money being earned and won, till the orchard fruit was carted in the mellow sunlight of October and the ingathering closed for the year. Yet, for some reason, the lilt in the air was not that of yore, and there was a shadow on this land of which all who walked these fields were fully conscious. What was the hidden secret? And if secret there were, where was the remedy? Was there something wrong on the land?

Luke went on with his mowing, and the heavy swathes fell before his scythe; but the mind of the one who watched him went back to the words he had uttered, the silence only broken by the sweep of the broad blade in the tough grass. There was much of truth in them; but they did not tell the whole story. The conditions ruling in one district, and even in the same county, are no certain index of what may be happening in another close at hand. There are fair farms and poor, well-placed and ill. There are many billets on the land for the labourer that are certainly not without their advantages and opportunities, as there are others in plenty where there is little to be looked for beyond the slender weekly wage, the struggle to make the two ends meet —where the soil is as poor as the man who farms it, and the home of the owner is closed. There is no hiding such things as these last. The evidence is patent to every casual passer-by who cares to use his eyes.

Luke has cut out his corner under the great

trees, and the swathes of dew-laden grass, the nettles and the docks, lie limp in his track. His shirt is open at the neck and chest, and he takes off his hat and wipes the sweat from his forehead with the back of his arm ; the evening being sultry and the air without movement.

He stands for a moment, looking up at the heavens, westward, where the sun is sinking behind breadths of violet cloud. Then he calls to that other, “ Ther’ be the look in the sky of fallin’ weather, I’m thinkin’ : see how the sun be sroudin’ ¹ yonder.”

His eyes turned after that from the heavens to the land. For a moment he was silent. Then he picked up a handful of the cool, newly-mown grass, and began wiping the bright blade of his scythe.

“ Ah—the land ! ” he exclaimed at last. “ Ther’ be nothin’ wrong wi’ the land, if summut be wrong out here. There be a old sayin’ along o’ we, as everyone knows what to do with a bad wife except the man as has got her ; and there be wiseacres enough in these

¹ Sometimes, “ shrouding ”—the term used to describe the rays of the sun, when slanting downwards like the shrouds of a ship.

days, for sure. But what I says is—and I'll say it to my dying day—as there is them as means to make England lick the dust, and unless summút's done to 'tice the young folk back to wher' they should be, and learn 'em when they've got 'em ther', it'll be just useless to cast round this way for recruits."

He pulled himself up for a moment at this point, and then added with a tightening of the lips and a certain fire in his eyes, "I bain't a-going to say, mind yer, as *we* shan't be there, all the same."

Is the spirit of the old folk dead? It could hardly be so, if men like Luke are to be found. Once more we recall the old hands—their sense of duty, their virility, their apparent love of work for work's sake, the way in which they faced circumstances that might well have made their forbears, if not they themselves, doubt whether there was a God in heaven for the poor, or any justice on this earth: once again there rise up before the mind the faces of old friends who went about their humble duties with something akin to a sense of honour, and always without complaint or

thought of grumbling. We hear them laughing yet again when recalling the incidents of their lives and the hardships of the far-off days ; and as we retrace our steps in memory, the question repeats itself in other form—Is the spirit dead that once was theirs ?

The answer need not remain in doubt. No wide experience is here in any way claimed. But if lifelong association with the labourer on the land—if familiarity with something of the inner lives of those who work here, and will continue so to do, till, in Luke Hulle's phrase, they put in for their final discharge—if such gives the smallest title to reply, the words can take but one form.

Tradition has not been lost. Something of the old spirit has been handed down. Go where one may, whether to the lonely sheep-fold on the downs, out on to the bleak hills, or to the tail of the plough in the heavy soil of this vale, the old spirit is found to be alive in many an instance still. More rare it may be ; coloured by the conditions of these later days it must of necessity be ; but it lives, and all that it requires that it may not vanish alto-

gether is careful fostering by the wisest means that may be found. While it remains in evidence on the country-side, the Nation stands for every reason rich in the first of its recruiting grounds. Will the Nation let the spirit of the old folk die?

THE END



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